Council of Australian
Postgraduate Associations
(CAPA)

Constituent Briefing Paper:

Out of sight, out of mind?
*Strategies for supporting
external postgraduate students*
June 2003

Out of sight, out of mind?
Strategies for supporting external postgraduate students

Summary of strategies

This briefing paper discusses the educational experience of external postgraduate students, describing the difficulties they may encounter due to their distance from the university and suggesting strategies for their support.

Strategies to reduce isolation
- Producing regular newsletters including university information, activities for external students and news from other students;
- Incorporating an element of face-to-face contact in distance education courses, either through residential schools or staff visits to rural and remote locations;
- Providing financial support to enable external students to attend residential schools.

Strategies to improve communication
- Promoting the importance of prompt and detailed feedback on student assignments in academic staff development;
- Encouraging staff and students to discuss their expectations for communication;
- Establishing staff contact times for electronic or telephone communication with students;
- Making distance education staff aware of ways to facilitate communication between students enrolled in their courses, for example using email discussion groups, on-line chat rooms, electronic bulletin boards, or co-ordinating study groups for students living in the same rural or remote areas;
- Including information in enrolment packs about the importance of regularly checking university email accounts for important university administrative information;
- Offering students, where possible, a choice as to whether they would like receive information from the university by mail or email.

Strategies to reduce frustration
- Ensuring that all staff members in contact with external students, including academic staff, university administrators and Centrelink staff, are well trained and have access to on-going professional development; and
- Establishing a point of contact, such as a Distance Education Liaison Officer, or External Student Support Officer for students to contact when they experience any difficulties relating to their course. This person should be aware of all university support services available to external students, and be capable of referring external students to appropriate services in order to remedy any technological, academic or administrative problems.

Strategies for reducing administrative difficulties
- Revising university administrative procedures for external students in response to student feedback on any administrative difficulties encountered.

- Where possible, producing one document providing information on all administrative requirements for external students as a reference document for consultation throughout their period of study. This information should be distributed to students as well as being available on-line and by telephone order via a free-call number.
- Posting printed material to students via the postal service early enough to accommodate delays in mail reaching students in remote locations.

Strategies to increase access to CIT
- Expanding opening hours of university computer laboratories to provide access for distance education students who are only able to travel to the university campus outside working hours;
- Ensuring that all students have remote access to a university email account;
- Developing a supply of university CIT equipment such as lap-top computers, modems, and software that can be loaned to students;
- Providing financial support to students from designated equity groups to assist with the purchase of CIT equipment;
- Developing a university student network for the sale and purchase of second-hand CIT equipment;
- Providing sensitive and culturally appropriate CIT skills development programs;
- Ensuring that all students and staff involved in courses requiring the use of CIT have access to university support systems to fix any technology failures;
- Conducting targeted outreach campaigns to promote university services among students who may not be aware of the available support.

Strategies to improve access to university resources
- Extending evening and weekend opening hours of university libraries, in order to improve access for external students in full-time employment who live within travelling distance of the campus;
- Employing staff to work specifically with distance students, such as specialist distance education librarians;
- Ensuring that clear information about university resources is available on university websites;
- Removing any additional charges for external student access to university resources.

Strategies to improve access to student support services
- Creating a dedicated Services Liaison Officer for students who are not studying on the main university campus;
- Developing Student Guides to provide information and contact details for student support services available to external students;
- Surveying external student to determine their support needs and evaluate whether these are being met;
- Promoting university support services and postgraduate association services among external students.

Introduction

Distance education increases access to postgraduate study for students who would not otherwise be able to attend a university campus. This briefing paper discusses the educational experience of external postgraduate students, describing the difficulties they may encounter due to their distance from the university and suggesting strategies for their support. The scope of this paper has been directed by CAPA Action Policy for 2003:

> 3.1.6.5 The CAPA Research Officer will produce a briefing paper on the educational experience of off-campus and distance postgraduate students. The paper will discuss the difference between the experience of on-campus and off-campus students, and will discuss the support needs of off-campus students. The briefing paper will also highlight the difficulties faced by distance education students, particularly in terms of access to university resources and facilities, and instances of additional charges levied on off-campus students by their institution.

> 3.1.6.6 All CAPA constituents will supply information on policies relating to off-campus students at their University to the CAPA Research Officer. Where appropriate, constituents will also supply examples of additional fees levied on distance education students by their University, or information about off-campus students' access to university resources and facilities.

> 3.1.6.7 The paper will make recommendations for university policies to support off-campus and distance education students. These recommendations will be used by postgraduate associations to lobby for more supportive policies for off-campus and distance education students at their universities. The recommendations will also be used by the CAPA Executive to lobby the Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee (AV-CC) and the Deans and Directors of Graduate Study (DDOGS).

Each section of this paper examines a particular area of concern for external students, and provides suggestions to remedy these concerns. The discussion of each issue is informed both by distance education literature and by information provided by postgraduate student associations around the country, often in the form of surveys of their members or policies relating to distance education at their university. Before these issues are examined, the paper defines what is meant by 'distance education' and related terms, and briefly identifies the current external postgraduate student cohort.

Definitions

The vocabulary of distance education can be confusing. Terms such as 'distance education', 'open learning' and 'flexible delivery' are used interchangeably by some authors, despite their differences. As Pearson and Ford warn, "the terminology of open and flexible educational provisions … does not have precise and agreed upon meanings. It can be used quite idiosyncratically, if not

haphazardly, by writers making their own meanings of events and trends".[1] For this reason, it is important to provide some preliminary definitions of key terms used in this paper.

Distance education
Fraser and Deane define distance education as "the circumstance whereby there is no regular face-to-face contact between teacher and learner. The student receives learning resources and benefits from the planning, guidance and tuition of a tertiary teaching institution enabling him/her to obtain an award at that institution without the need to attend classes".[2] Sherry adds that the hallmarks of distance education are "the separation of teaching and learner in space and/or time, the volitional control of learning by the student rather than the distant instructor, and noncontiguous communication between student and teacher, mediated by print or some form of technology".[3]

Drawing on both of these definitions, the term 'distance education' is used throughout this paper to refer to any form of education involving:
▪ geographical distance between the teacher and the student;
▪ student discretion over the location, duration and pace of study, within a timeline determined by the university; and
▪ communications and information technology (CIT) or the exchange of print-based materials as the primary mode of communication between teacher and student, rather than face-to-face teaching.

Distance education may also include short components of face-to-face teaching, in the form of residential schools, block release components or visits by the teacher to rural and remote centres.

Generations of distance education
Discussions of distance education often refer to technological advances in delivery as belonging to different 'generations'. These are usually defined as:

First Generation: 'Correspondence Model', teaching via printed material;

Second Generation: 'Multi-media Model', teaching via print, audiotape, videotape, computer-based learning, interactive video;

Third Generation: 'Tele-learning Model', teaching via audio tele-conferencing, video-conferencing, audiographic communication, broadcast TV/radio;

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[1] Margot Pearson and Lys Ford*, Open and Flexible PhD Study and Research,* Evaluations and Investigations Programme, Higher Education Division, Department of Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs (DEETYA), 97/16, Commonwealth of Australia, October 1997, p xii.
[2] Sharon Fraser and Elizabeth Deane*, Doers and Thinkers: An Investigation of the Use of Open-learning Strategies to Develop Life-long Learning Competencies in Undergraduate Science Students,* Evaluations and Investigations Programme, Higher Education Division, Department of Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs (DEETYA), 98/7, Commonwealth of Australia May 1998, p 18.
[3] Lorraine Sherry, 'Issues in Distance Learning', *International Journal of Educational Telecommunications*, 1/4, 1996, p 337-365, p 2 (on-line).

Fourth Generation: 'Flexible Learning model', teaching via interactive multimedia (IMM) on-line, internet based access to WWW resources, computer-mediated communication;

Fifth Generation: 'Intelligent Flexible Learning model', interactive multimedia (IMM) on-line, internet based access to WWW resources, computer-mediated communication using automated response systems, campus portal access to institutional processes and resources.[4]

In practise, distance education may combine several generations of technology. For example, many on-line distance education courses offered by universities remain supplemented by print based materials.

Flexible delivery
'Flexible learning' and 'flexible delivery' have been popular terms in higher education since the 1990s. Proponents of flexible delivery argue that its recent popularity stems from the desire to make higher education more accessible and responsive to the preferences of a broader range of students.[5] This popularity may also be related to the perception that flexible learning options are cheaper to provide than face-to-face teaching.

Fraser and Deane define flexible learning as any form of education which provides an element of flexibility "in the mode of learning and attendance, the resources that are made available, the pace of learning, the interaction between learners and between learner and teacher, learner support and the methods of assessment".[6] Flexible learning includes, but is not synonymous with, forms of distance education. For example, models of flexible provision of higher education can include courses that are specifically designed for articulation between the VET and higher education sectors, or customised industry programmes, neither of which need to include a distance education component.

Open learning
Pearson and Ford define open learning as a "philosophy of education" which has extended access to education. "Open learning has been defined as a form of study which a student may enter without prior qualifications, where the student has the greatest choice of topics of study, period of studies, place and time of study, and modes of assessment".[7] As the current Minister for Education, Dr Brendan Nelson, has commented, "a generation ago, most university students

[4] James C. Taylor, *Fifth Generation Distance Education*, Higher Education Series, Report No. 40, June 2001, Higher Education Division, Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs (DETYA), p 3.
[5] Peter Ling, Geoff Arger, Helen Smallwood, Ron Toomey, Denise Kirkpatrick, Ian Barnard, 'The Effectiveness of Models of Flexible Provision of Higher Education', Evaluations and Investigations Programme, Higher Education Division, DETYA, 01/9, Commonwealth of Australia, 2001, p 5.
[6] Fraser and Deane, 1998, p 17.
[7] Pearson and Ford, 1997, p xii.

were full-time, live-at-home school leavers".[8] Open learning has extended access to higher education beyond this narrow segment of society to older people, full time workers, and people without final year secondary school qualifications.

Distance education is a type of open learning and an example of flexible delivery, but they are not interchangeable terms. The terms 'open learning' and 'flexible delivery' can also refer to forms of face-to-face teaching; distance between teacher and student is not necessarily a defining element of either term. Fraser and Deane explain that, "distance education is encompassed by the term 'open learning' ".[9] However, some elements of distance education may not be open or flexible. For example, postgraduate research students who are externally enrolled in a PhD programme are undertaking a form of distance education with little flexibility regarding entry requirements, period of study or mode of assessment.

Internal and external students
Universities are increasingly offering students the choice between internal and external enrolment in a range of degrees. Internal students attend a university campus and their primary mode of study is through face-to-face contact with academic staff. Internal undergraduate and postgraduate coursework students attend lectures, tutorials, or laboratory sessions with other students at times scheduled by the university. These classes have traditionally been held during the day, but are increasingly also offered during evenings to accommodate students in full-time employment.

External students are not required to attend a campus and study using distance education technologies. External students may visit the campus for a residential school, to visit a supervisor in person, or to use university resources, but the majority of their learning takes place alone and off campus. Both internal and external students can choose to study either full-time or part-time. Students are increasingly choosing to study externally, and to study part-time. DEST analysis shows that "there has been a steady increase in the proportions of students who have study patterns other than the traditional internal, full-time mode. Thirty seven per cent of students in 2001 had attendance patterns other than internal full-time".[10] This papers uses the terms 'external students' and 'distance education' students as synonyms.

Mixed-mode
The term mixed-mode is used to refer to courses where study is neither solely internal nor external. In practise, mixed-mode enrolment usually refers to

[8] Brendan Nelson, *Striving for Quality: Learning, Teaching and Scholarship*, Commonwealth Department of Education, Science and Training Issues Paper, Commonwealth of Australia, June 2002, p 9.
[9] Fraser and Deane, 1998, p 17.
[10] Nelson, 2002, p 10.

courses which have both a substantial face-to-face teaching component and a significant period of study where students learn from a distance. 'Mixed-mode' delivery has been an integral component of 'both ways' education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students living in remote communities, ensuring the students have access to the Aboriginal knowledges of their communities, as well contact with the Western academic knowledge of university staff and libraries.[11]

Away from base and block release
Students who live in rural or remote communities may study externally but attend block release sections of their course where they travel to the university for short periods of intense teaching contact. For example, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students living, and often undertaking research, in remote communities may travel considerable distances for short periods of on-campus study. Block release is a form of mixed-mode teaching as there is both an internal and external component of the course. Students who qualify for ABSTUDY receive some 'Away from Base' funding to financially support the block release component of their degree, although this was reduced in 1998 and again in 2000.[12]

On-campus and off-campus students
Off-campus students are not necessarily externally enrolled students. The term 'off-campus' can include students who are enrolled as internal students but whose study does not require them to physically attend a campus, or whose research is primarily undertaken in a hospital or external research laboratory. Some universities distinguish between students who are studying at the main university campus, and students who are based at other campuses, or remote sites. For example, the University of Melbourne Student Support Project recognises the distinct needs of 'outstationed' students who are not based at the university's original Parkville campus.[13] 'Outstationed' student, like distance education students, cannot easily access student support services at the Parkville campus.

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[11] Neil Baumgart, Christine Halse, Hugh Philip, Natascha McNamara, Jean Aston and Aileen Power*, Meeting the needs of Indigenous communities: Evaluation of Bachelor College,* 95/7, Department of Education, Employment and Training (DEET), AGPS: Canberra, September 1995, p 98.

[12] For discussion of the effect of ABSTUDY funding changes in 1998 and 2000 on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participation in higher education, see:
Australian Indigenous Higher Education Association Committee, *Submission to the Inquiry into the capacity of public universities to meet Australia's higher education needs*, May 2001;
National Tertiary Education Union Indigenous Tertiary Education Policy Committee (NTEU ITEPC), *Submission to the 2001 Inquiry into the capacity of public universities to meet Australia's higher education needs*, May 2001;
Meryan Tozer, *A submission by the National Indigenous Postgraduate Association Aboriginal Corporation to the Joint DEST/Centrelink ABSTUDY Service Delivery Project*, April 2003.
<http://www.capa.edu.au/aboriginal/ABSTUDY_Service_Delivery.doc>

[13] University of Melbourne Student Support Committee, *Diversity in Access and Delivery of Student Services: Project Report*, Draft Report, November 2001.

Identifying external postgraduate students

The majority of postgraduate students are over 30, and are subject to the commitments that typically accompany the middle decades of many peoples' lives.[14] Postgraduate students often have partners, children, mortgages, debt repayments, employment commitments, and aging parents. For many of them, studying on campus is not an option. For example, a survey of postgraduate coursework students at Curtin University found that 61.5 per cent of external students were also working full-time.[15] The personal circumstances of some students, such as incarcerated students, may also mean that distance education is the only education option available.

Fraser and Deane identify a variety of reasons for students to undertake distance education. They describe distance education students as

> Learners from widely varied backgrounds who:
> - are generally older, are voluntarily seeking further education and are highly motivated and self-disciplined;
> - may be intelligent adults who slipped through the net of formal education…
> - may be adults interested in reskilling or considering a career change
> - are possibly disenchanted learners who are dissatisfied with the traditional system of education
> - individuals who may have been excluded from conventional institutions due to resource constraints
> - are increasingly female …
> - are adults, young and old, in developing countries.[16]

In Australia, distance education is a particularly popular mode of study for students who live in rural and remote areas, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Distance education may be the only accessible mode of study for students living far from a university campus. The now defunct Higher Education Council had nominated "the improvement of the retention and success of students studying by external mode" as an 'action priority' for rural and isolated students.[17] A far greater proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students than non-Indigenous students live in rural or remote areas. In 2001, 31.5% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students were classified as rural students, in comparison with 18.4% of non-Indigenous students. In the same year, 15.7% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students were classified as

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[14] Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST),*Students 2001: Selected Higher Education Statistics*, Canberra, 2002, Table 26.

[15] Adrienne Rashford and Leah Dowsett, *CUPSA Coursework Survey 2000: Course satisfaction levels and the postgraduate coursework community of Curtin University of Technology*, Curtin University Postgraduate Students' Association, December 2001, p 9.

[16] Fraser and Deane,1998, pp. 19-20.

[17] Higher Education Council, *Equality, Diversity and Excellence: Advancing the National Higher Education Equity Framework*, National Board of Employment, Education and Training (NBEET), AGPS: Canberra, April 1996, p xvii.

remote students, in comparison with only 1.3% of non-Indigenous students.[18] This fact contributes to the high proportion (one quarter) of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students studying externally.[19]

Australian universities differ in the extent to which they offer students the option of external or mixed-mode enrolment. As can be seen in Chart One, DEST data[20] record that in 2002 the majority of students at Charles Sturt University, the University of New England, Southern Queensland University, Deakin University and Southern Cross University were studying externally or in mixed-mode courses.   External and mixed-mode students also made up one fifth to two fifths of all students at the University of South Australia, Monash University, Edith Cowan University, Murdoch University, Northern Territory University and Central Queensland University in 2002.

Postgraduate students are able to externally enrol in a variety of coursework and research degrees at a number of institutions. In their analysis of open and flexible PhD study and research, Pearson and Ford argue that far more PhD students study off-campus, communicate with their supervisors from a distance, and experience part time or mixed-mode enrolment than is often realised. Rather than perceiving a full-time, on-campus research candidature as the norm, they argue that universities need to recognise the increasing diversity of postgraduate research degrees.

> Many handbooks reflect a view that there is a 'normal' (traditional/ conventional) candidature with variations for special circumstances. A more useful frame would be to see 'open and flexible PhD study and research' as usual, value the diversity, and ensure the conditions of research and study are as appropriate and productive as possible to meet each student's particular needs and circumstances. In particular, it should be acknowledged that attendance on-campus in itself will not ensure participation in a 'research culture', nor will all aspects of the relevant research culture necessarily be on-campus as the 'network of knowledge institutions', which includes sites other than universities, grows and diversifies.[21]

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[18] DEST, 2002, 'All Indigenous and non-Indigenous rural and isolated students, 2001'. Students are classified as rural or remote students on the basis of their home postcode.
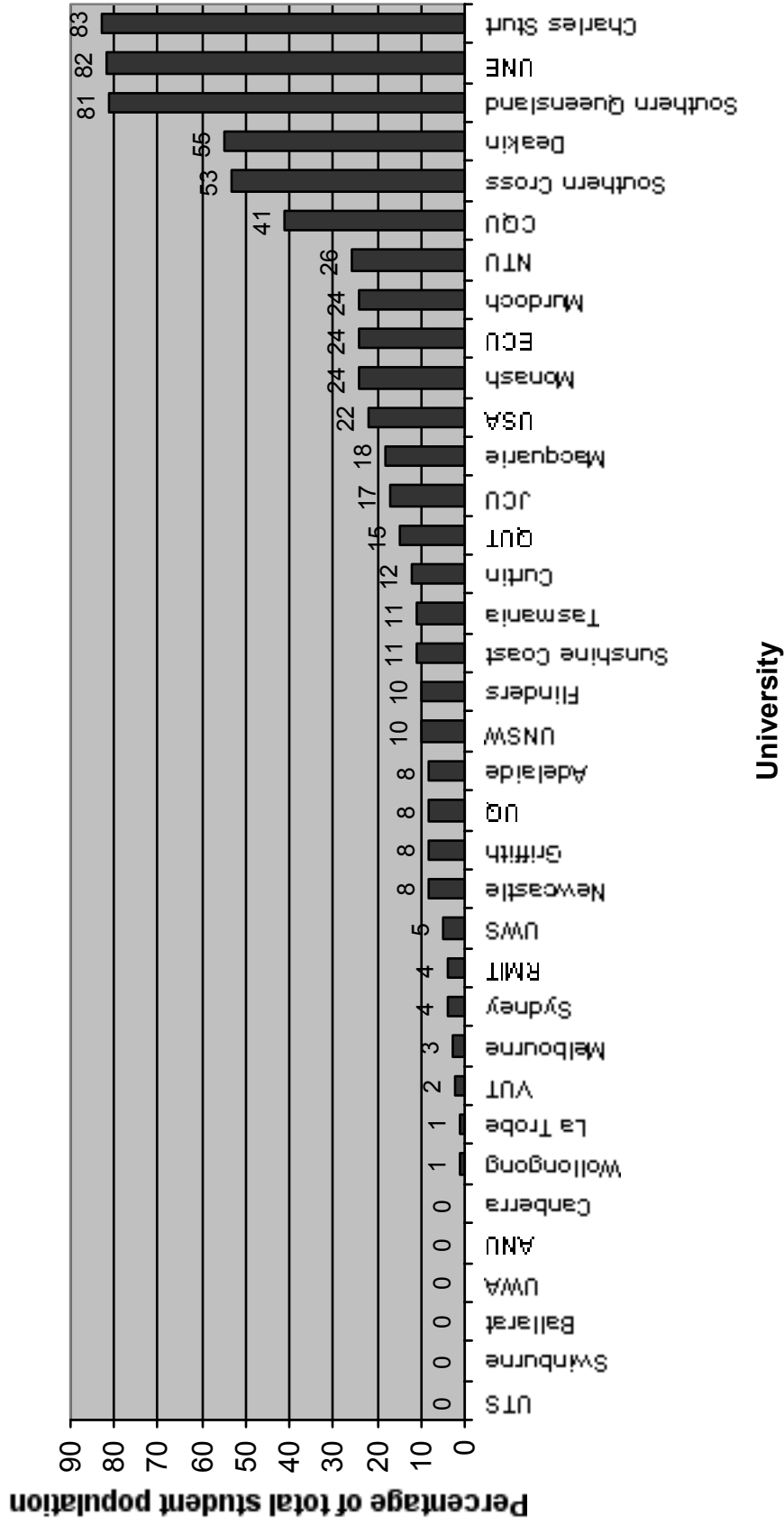[19] National Report to Parliament on Indigenous Education and Training, Chapter 6, p.89.
[20] Department of Education, Science and Training, *Students 2002:Selected Higher Education Statistics,* Canberra, 2003, Table 25: All Students by State, Institution, Mode of Attendance, Type of Attendance and Gender.
[21] Pearson and Ford, 1997, p xi.

Chart One: Proportion of student population studying externally or in mixed-mode at Australian universities in 2002

(Source: DEST, *Students 2002: Selected Higher Education Statistics,*   Canberra, 2003, Table 25)

University	Percentage of total student population
Charles Sturt	83
UNE	82
Southern Queensland	81
Deakin	55
Southern Cross	53
CQU	41
NTU	26
Murdoch	24
ECU	24
Monash	24
USA	22
Macquarie	18
JCU	17
QUT	15
Curtin	12
Tasmania	11
Sunshine Coast	11
Flinders	10
UNSW	10
Adelaide	10
UQ	8
Griffith	8
Newcastle	8
UWS	8
RMIT	5
Sydney	4
Melbourne	4
VUT	3
La Trobe	2
Wollongong	1
Canberra	1
ANU	0
UWA	0
Ballarat	0
Swinburne	0
UTS	0

Diverse educational experiences

Sweeping generalisations about 'the distance education experience' are by nature inaccurate. Any student cohort identified on the basis of one shared characteristic -- external enrolment in this case -- will include individual students whose experiences have varied dramatically. Preliminary analysis of a survey of distance education students conducted by the Deakin University Student Association (DUSA) in 2002 indicates that "the experiences of distance students vary enormously and that they are not a homogeneous group".

The diversity of external students' experiences and backgrounds means that their support needs will also vary considerably. Analysing the experiences of the external students they have taught, academics Chyung, Winiecki, and Fenner identified the following issues as contributing factors for external student attrition:
- discrepancies between their professional or personal interests and the course structure;
- low confidence levels in distance learning;
- doubts in their online communication abilities;
- lack of competence in using the distance education software as an effective learning tool;
- feelings of being overwhelmed or overloaded by advanced knowledge and information; and
- the de-personalised learning environment.[22]

Fraser and Deane have described distance education as a 'self-discovery process' for students, particularly for students who are returning to study after a long absence from the education system. Their evaluation of student feedback identified key issues for distance education students as being: establishing study skills and realistic study patterns, fitting study time in around family and household demands, and lack of confidence in their academic ability.[23] These issues are equally relevant for internal students. A key difference, however, is that external students may often experience more difficulty accessing student support services to help address these issues.

For students at Deakin, the significant factor influencing their university experience was the personal relationship between the student and their lecturer or tutor. Students whose experience of external study was primarily positive had regular and supportive contact with their lecturer or tutor, while for students who evaluated their experience negatively, that contact tended to be limited to brief evaluations of assignments.[24] This finding reflects Brown's analysis of

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[22] Yonnie Chyung, Donald Winiecki, Jo Ann Fenner, Evaluation of Effective Interventions to Solve the Dropout Problem in Adult Distance Education, *Ed-Media,* 1999, p 4.

[23] Fraser and Deane, 1998, p 79.

[24] Based on personal communication with Brian Edward, Postgraduate Research Officer at Deakin University Student Association (DUSA). The DUSA report on the 2002 survey of distance

discontinuing Deakin distance students where perceived lack of contact and lack of support were the major contributors to distance students discontinuing their studies.[25]

Contact and support are not only necessary for distance learners, but for distance teachers as well. Fraser and Deane's interviews with academic staff teaching undergraduate science degree courses by distance identified insufficient staff numbers, excessive workload, and isolation as issues affecting their capacity to meet the needs of their students.[26] Staff members' comments included:

> 'There are problems as the student numbers keep going up but there is no increase in staff numbers.'
> 'Distance education students really need a person available to them on the end of the phone at all hours …but there is not the manpower…The students who are assertive and chase me up with questions etc. are okay but those I do not hear from are a cause for worry…"[27]
> 'The on-campus staff have time to prepare their work as they go along whereas distance education staff have to prepare everything six months in advance. They have to think ahead, anticipating how the students will react to the work … the distance education staff share some of the alienation of the students.'[28]

Isolation

The physical distance of an external student from the university and other students enrolled in the course may contribute to a sense of isolation. External and part time students surveyed at Deakin, Monash, RMIT and Swinburne reported feeling isolated both from academic experiences and from their peers. Students comments included: "I had a hard time, fell behind and have never had any contact from the university" and "I can't afford costs and feel deserted and unsupported".[29]

Universities and postgraduate student associations are aware that distance education is a potentially isolating experience and have developed strategies to overcome this. One strategy is to create a sense of learning community by compiling and distributing regular newsletters with news about student activities and the experiences of students at the university. The University of South

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students at Deakin University is currently in progress. Please contact Brian at bjedward@deakin.edu.au with any queries.
[25] Kevin M. Brown, "The role of internal and external factors in discontinuation of off-campus students", *Distance Education,* 17/1, 1996, pp 44-71.
[26] Fraser and Deane, 1998, p 80-84.
[27] Ibid, p 80.
[28] Ibid, p 84.
[29] Sue Fullarton, *Identifying the needs of coursework postgraduate students: The case of DUPA, MPA, RPA and SUPA*, 1997, A joint projected conducted for Deakin University Postgraduate Association (DUPA), Monash Postgraduate Association (MPA), RMIT Postgraduate Association (RPA), and Swinburne University Postgraduate Association (SUPA), Melbourne, 1997, p 28.

Australia Student Association (USASA) produces a quarterly Externals Newsletter. USASA's survey of distance education students found that 80% of students read at least part of the Externals Quarterly Newsletter.[30] The survey report concludes that,

> Respondents very strongly indicated an appreciation of positive news and a student focus, especially articles about other students and their activities, what people are doing now, opportunities and student contributions. Another frequently mentioned area was information about grants and scholarships at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels.[31]

USASA also convenes an external students e-group, although only 7 per cent of survey respondents were subscribers to the e-group.

Research on distance education demonstrates that external students benefit greatly from some opportunity for face-to-face contact with their lecturer and other students in the course. This can involve students travelling to the university for a residential component of the course, known as a residential school. Fraser and Deane argue that "residential schools are almost essential for distance education students for clarification of ideas and concepts, finding compatible fellow students for mutual help, study and support and brief social and academic contacts with other students and lecturers".[32] However, travel to residential schools involves considerable expense for students. Financial support needs to be available to students so that they are not excluded from valuable learning opportunities because of the cost of travel, accommodation and childcare.

Contact between external students can help to build peer support networks. For example, Dr Linda Hancock, selected as the Deakin University Supervisor of the Year in 1996, has facilitated a peer network for her part-time and off-campus students.[33] Dr Hancock has organised a successful series of PhD seminars for a core group of five PhD students, three of whom were off-campus and one of whom was enrolled part-time . Her 'active-mentoring program' aims "to provide active on-campus support and collegiality to reduce the isolation of the PhD experience - especially for off-campus students, who live within travelling distance of the campus; to nurture a group solidarity and community of interchange and sharing amongst the PhD candidates; …to actively mentor students to develop publications, conference papers and to actively assist in their job applications".[34]

Alternatively, lecturers may travel to remote locations where a number of external students are based. For example, staff from La Trobe University have travelled to Central Australia to provide block teaching and skills training to groups of

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[30] Julia Northway, *External Students Questionnaire Report*, University of South Australia Students Association, Adelaide, March 2002. p 20.
[31] Northway, 2002, p 32.
[32] Fraser and Deane, 1998, p 96.
[33] Pearson and Ford, 1997, p 46-47.
[34] Ibid, p 47.

Indigenous students.[35] External students at the University of South Australia have also responded positively to regional visits from university staff. USASA's survey of distance students found that "regional contact was viewed as being very valuable, with other requests for rural workshops/ forums, visits to major centres around the country".[36]

For some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students from rural and remote communities, distance education may be a less isolating experience than moving to a capital city to study on-campus. Distance education can enable these students to maintain a high level of contact with the Indigenous community they may live or work within. Baugmart et al. explain that physical distance from Western educational institutions ensures that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students do not lose access to Indigenous knowledges.

> Some educationalists, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, see the remoteness of many Aboriginal communities as a positive factor in the maintenance of Aboriginal culture because it allows at least some degree of physical separation from Western culture. Some theorists have based their advocacy of approaches such as 'two-ways' (or 'both-ways') education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people on a concept of the necessity and possibility of the separation of cultures. The use of technology and telecommunications to deliver educational programmes into remote communities has great appeal with this kind of separatist approach. Rigmor George argued that technology offers ways of bridging the gap between students and their peers, lecturers and educational resources, while maintaining cultural distance from the dominant culture.[37]

All students benefit from support, whether from their lecturer or supervisor, their community, or their fellow students. Strategies for reducing the sense of isolation experienced by external students can include:
- Universities or student associations producing regular newsletters including university information, activities for external students and news from other students
- Universities incorporating an element of face-to-face contact in distance education courses, either through residential schools or staff visits to rural and remote locations
- University financial support to enable external students to attend residential schools.

[35] 'On the Road to a Better Life', *The Australian*, 16 October 2002, p.42

[36] Northway, p 32.

[37] Neil Baumgart, Christine Halse, Hugh Philip, Natascha McNamara, Jean Aston, Aileen Power, *Meeting the Needs of Indigenous Communities: Evaluation of Batchelor College*, 95/7, Department of Education, Employment and Training (DEET), AGPS: Canberra, September 1995, p 18.

Communication

Communication with academic staff and other students helps to reduce the isolation of distance education students, and increases the likelihood that they will successfully complete their degree. Sherry describes this as 'interactivity', and stresses the importance of 'connectivity' between students, their teachers and their peers. "The quality and integrity of the educational process depends upon sustained, two-way communication. Without connectivity, distance learning degenerates into the old correspondence course model of independent study. The student becomes autonomous and isolated, procrastinates, and eventually drops out".[38]

Communication with academic staff
The communication between academic staff and their external students contributes significantly to students' success. While distance student attrition is often attributed to students' poor time management and procrastination, a number of researchers have demonstrated that lack of communication between students and teachers is also a contributing factor. Timely and supportive communication between academic staff and students, has been repeatedly proven to increase the completion rate for distance education.[39]

Student surveys confirm that students value prompt communication from their lecturers. For example, students responding to SUPRA's survey of postgraduate coursework students made the following comments.

> "The major problem I have experienced coming from a rural background is the extreme lack of communication …[such as] not being able to access course material when available. All readings should be sent to students in a reasonable period of time. I received my reading materials the day of my first intensive day lecture. This was great when I was attending class and my readings were at home in my mailbox four hours away … These areas need a lot of work in order to encourage rural professionals to come to Sydney for lectures."

> "Work modules are almost never sent soon enough to be completed by the suggested timetable. They are generally at least 2-3 weeks late which makes things very difficult at exam time since it reduces time which can be spent on assignments."[40]

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[38] Lorraine Sherry, 'Issues in Distance Learning', *International Journal of Educational Telecommunications*, 1/4, 1996, p 337-365, p 6 (on-line).

[39] Sherry, 1996 cites S. Charp, 'Viewpoint', *The On-line Chronicle of Distance Education and Communication*, 7/2, April 1994; and D. Porter, *New Directions in Distance Learning: Interim Report*, Schools Curriculum Programs, British Columbia, Canada, March 1994. See also Kevin M. Brown, "The role of internal and external factors in discontinuation of off-campus students", *Distance Education,* 17/1, 1996, pp 44-71.

[40] Danielle Brown, Anne Swinbourne, Mary-Ellen Harrod, *Outing Coursework: Report of the 1999 survey of postgraduate coursework students at the University of Sydney*, Sydney University Postgraduate Representative Association, 2000, p 54.

In particular, distance students require prompt and detailed feedback on assessed work. A survey of postgraduate coursework students at Deakin, Monash, RMIT and Swinburne universities found that a significant proportion of students did not feel that they were receiving satisfactory feedback on their progress, and that this was most strongly felt by external students.

> 'Feedback on your progress' was the aspect of their course with which most postgraduates were not at all satisfied or borderline (almost 40%). Comments from respondents also indicated a need for improvement in gaining effective, positive and prompt feedback on assessment tasks and progress. Some suggested this reflected how staff were under-resourced and overloaded. External students indicated this lack of feedback was of particular concern.[41]

Similarly, student comments in the SUPRA survey included statements such as "more comments by the lecturer needed on essays. As an external student, it is most important to get quality and quantity feedback".[42]

Students were also concerned about the lengthy delays involved in feedback from academic staff. The time taken to return assessments was of particular concern to external students. One commented, "I am constantly frustrated with time delay in getting marked assignments back. I have started to write up second assignments without feedback from first, and this has the effect of me losing momentum and interest in the unit".[43]

Fraser and Deane's study of distance education for undergraduate science students demonstrated that communication between staff and students is a vital part of successful distance education. "One consistent theme emerged from both cohorts of students -- the pivotal role played by the academic in the learning process and the notion that students and staff were a team working toward a common objective."[44] Fraser and Deane argue that distance education should not involve individual students learning in isolation, but that effective distance educators "regularly engage in two way communication with their students, providing meaningful feedback and encouragement throughout the learning process".[45]

Fraser and Deane's study also demonstrates that distance education students expect to control the amount of communication they have with their teachers: "he

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[41] Sue Fullarton, *Identifying the needs of coursework postgraduate students: The case of DUPA, MPA, RPA and SUPA*, 1997, A joint projected conducted for Deakin University Postgraduate Association (DUPA), Monash Postgraduate Association (MPA), RMIT Postgraduate Association (RPA), and Swinburne University Postgraduate Association (SUPA), Melbourne, 1997, p 2.
[42] Brown, Swinbourne and Harrod, 2000, p 12.
[43] Ibid, p 17.
[44] Sharon Fraser and Elizabeth Deane, *Doers and Thinkers: An Investigation of the Use of Open-learning Strategies to Develop Life-long Learning Competencies in Undergraduate Science Students*, Evaluations and Investigations Programme, Higher Education Division, Department of Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs (DEETYA), 98/7, May 1998, p x.
[45] Ibid, p 19.

or she [the student] can choose how much or how little contact is made with the institution".[46] This differs from the academic conventions associated with face-to-face teaching, where students' contact with their teachers is limited to the lecture or tutorial and to specific consultation hours set by the academic. This change has serious repercussions for staff workload. Students may have unrealistic expectations about the ability of staff to respond promptly to their questions. Rather than restricting student contact to 'office hours', staff may be inundated by email and telephone communication from distance students. For communication between staff and students to be effective, staff and students need to discuss their expectations at the beginning of the course and establish mutually acceptable communication protocols. For example, staff and students could arrange that all email queries will be answered at a particular time each week, or that staff will be available for any telephone queries at a particular time.

Communication with other students
Building communication networks between distance students enrolled in the same course can also be valuable. For example, Monash University has used both synchronous and asynchronous on-line chat with great success. A staff member at that university states that "one of the great challenges is to build a sense of community among people that may never meet face to face".[47] Other courses have used electronic bulletin boards, or facilitated meetings between students who live in the same rural or remote area.

Communication with university administration
A third important channel of communication is between the university administration and external students. Distance students have complained that they are not notified of changes to their courses, such as changes of lecturers, course content and fee structures, nor are they notified that courses no longer being offered. While there is no question that it is the university's responsibility to notify students of changes to their course, students can contribute to communication lapses by not reading university correspondence in a timely manner.

The recent survey of distance education students at the University of South Australia found that the majority of external students rarely or never access their student email accounts (50%) and only a limited number do so on a daily basis (13%).[48] Often universities use student email accounts as the primary method of communicating important administrative information. Universities which communicate with students using CIT may need to supplement this communication with printed information, to offer students a choice of electronic or printed information, or to emphasise the importance of checking their university email account to students when they enrol.

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[46] Ibid.
[47] Personal communication between Monash academic staff member and Monash Postgraduate Association (MPA) office bearer, 17 March 2003.
[48] Northway, 2002, p 26.

Communication is a key component in successful distance education. Strategies to improve communication with distance education students can include:
- Promoting the importance of prompt and detailed feedback on student assignments in academic staff development;
- Encouraging staff and students to discuss their expectations for communication;
- Establishing staff contact times for electronic or telephone communication with students;
- Making distance education staff aware of ways to facilitate communication between students enrolled in their courses, for example using email discussion groups, on-line chat rooms, electronic bulletin boards, or co-ordinating study groups for students living in the same rural or remote areas;
- Including information in enrolment packs about the importance of regularly checking university email accounts for important university administrative information;
- Offering students, where possible, a choice as to whether they would like receive information from the university by mail or email.

Frustration

External students may experience considerable frustration during their study. This may be caused by technological difficulties, conflicting information from the university, lack of feedback from academic staff, ambiguous directions for course assignments, or delays in accessing financial support. Hara and Kling have linked frustration with decreasing student motivation. This connection has significant consequences for distance education as it requires students to be highly motivated.

> Sustained frustrations impede students' learning. Frustration interferes with pursuing goals and that it is one of the factors to influence learning … high frustration can demotivate students. Motivation is a strong factor that influences student learning. Especially, distance education requires that students be self-regulated. In this kind of learning environment where students are away from traditional classrooms, frustration can be a major obstacle for distance learning.[49]

The link between frustration and motivation has also been demonstrated by the National Indigenous Postgraduate Association Aboriginal Corporation (NIPAAC) in relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander postgraduate students' access to ABSTUDY financial support. NIPAAC's recent submission to Centrelink

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[49] Noriko Hara and Rob Kling, Students' Frustrations with a Web-Based Distance Education Course, *First Monday*, 4/12, December 1999, pp. 6-7 of on-line document. <http://www.firstmonday.org/issues/issue4_12/hara/index.html>

discussed the numerous service delivery problems that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students encounter.[50] These include:

- the absence of staff who are qualified to answer ABSTUDY-related enquiries in most metropolitan and regional Centrelink offices;
- insufficient training for those Centrelink staff who do specialise in ABSTUDY issues;
- high Centrelink staff turnover resulting in students rarely dealing with the same staff member twice and having to re-explain their situation numerous times, often leading to administrative errors when files are not transferred successfully between staff members;
- delays in returning student phone calls and case manager allocation; and
- administrative errors resulting in students being over and underpaid, or having their allowance 'cut off' without notification.

NIPAAC believes that these frustrations contribute to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student attrition.

> For many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, particularly those from regional and isolated areas, participating in higher education brings new cultural, social and economic challenges. NIPAAC is concerned that ABSTUDY's bureaucratic inefficiencies contribute unnecessarily to existing pressures faced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples in postgraduate education. For some students, extensive problems with the delivery of ABSTUDY and associated student debt can be a trigger for dropping out of study.[51]

The frustration experienced by distance education students can be exacerbated by their sense of isolation. When a student has little contact, if any, with other students in their course, they may not realise that anyone else is experiencing similar difficulties. Students may feel that there is not any help available, or not be aware of student support services.

Strategies to reduce student frustration can include:

- Ensuring that all staff members in contact with external students, including academic staff, university administrators and Centrelink staff, are well trained and have access to on-going professional development; and
- Establishing a point of contact, such as a Distance Education Liaison Officer, or External Student Support Officer, for students to contact when they experience any difficulties relating to their course. This person should be aware of all university support services available to external students, and be capable of referring external students to appropriate services in order to remedy any technological, academic or administrative problems.

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[50] NIPAAC, *A submission by the National Indigenous Postgraduate Association Aboriginal Corporation (NIPAAC) to the Joint DEST/Centrelink ABSTUDY Service Delivery Project*, April 2003. <http://www.capa.edu.au/aboriginal/ABSTUDY_Service_Delivery.doc>
[51] Ibid, p 10.

Administrative problems

Postgraduate student surveys have identified administrative difficulties as being of particular concern to external students. As many distance students have chosen to study externally because of additional employment and family commitments, they have little time to navigate confusing university bureaucracy. Clear information on university administrative procedures and administrative requirements for students can vastly improve the distance education experience. A Curtin University Postgraduate Student Association (CUPSA) survey found that "many of Curtin's postgraduate community in 2000 were working full-time, and could not afford to spend great amounts of time on administrative matters that could have been avoided with the provision of clear information."[52]

For some external students at Sydney University, administrative concerns were the primary cause of their dissatisfaction with their course.   Student responses to the Sydney University Postgraduate Representative Association (SUPRA) survey included:

> *Being an external student working full-time it would be good to have administrative problems sorted out quickly. This year I had a course cancelled and only found out when I approached staff and then I have to make numerous phone calls to find the right person to resolve the problem. Good, clear communication channels would be very handy indeed.*

> *I was disadvantaged … by receiving the modules through the mail, as they were late due to our limited mail services. One module was printed and sent out two weeks into the semester, putting me behind yet again. Considering it is a rural and remote course, having the modules ready before the semester is essential to allow for the remote mail system.[53]*

Communication between the university and external students needs to be clear, non-contradictory and timely. Letters of offer from the university should set out the administrative requirements for all students. Students also need to be made aware of a central source of administrative advice for their course, in order to avoid receiving conflicting information. University deadlines for staff setting course content need to take into account the time needed for the delivery of printed material to students.

The following strategies may help to reduce administrative problems for external students:
- University administrative procedures for external students should be informed by student feedback on any administrative difficulties encountered.

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[52] Rashford and Dowsett, 2001, p 22.
[53] Brown, Swinbourne and Harrod, 2000, p 12.

- Where possible, information on all administrative requirements for external students should be located in one document that a student can keep for consultation throughout their period of study. This information should be distributed to students via their preferred means of communication, as well as being available on-line and by telephone via a free-call number.
- Posting printed material to students via the postal service should take place early enough to accommodate delays in mail reaching students in remote locations.

Access to Communications and Information Technology (CIT)

The increasing use of CIT in distance education has both positive and negative implications for equity of access to education. CIT can improve access to education for students in remote areas and students with particular disabilities. Students from a language background other than English may find it easier to participate in a class discussion that takes place over several days via an electronic bulletin board than the rapid pace of an oral discussion in a seminar or tutorial. Students with learning disabilities may also benefit from this form of alternative learning environment. Women studying in non-traditional areas may feel they have greater opportunity to participate in classes taught using CIT.[54]

However, using CIT in distance education also limits participation for students who do not have access to the necessary hardware and software, or for students who do not have a sufficient level of technological literacy. Barrakeet *et al.*'s survey of the use of CIT at the University of Technology, Sydney found that CIT created a barrier to access for students who could not afford the cost of the equipment, and for students whose background of educational or social disadvantage had not equipped them with sufficient CIT skills.

> The findings clearly indicate that economic costs and previous educational or social disadvantage reduce students' access options and support levels, thereby minimising their use of CIT for learning. Where low socio-economic status interacts with other equity identifications - such as disability and geographical isolation - the disadvantages specific to these identifications are magnified. For example, students of low socio-economic status with a disability, who require costly modified home equipment, face differentially high costs while having minimal capacity to meet these costs. Similarly, students of low socio-economic status from isolated areas face higher costs that urban students for online learning. In addition … the results indicate that age and gender are significant determinants of access to, support for, and use of CIT in learning, with women and older students experiencing a number of disadvantages.[55]

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[54] Jo Barraket, Anne Maree Payne, Geoff Scott, Lucy Cameron, *Equity and the Use of Communications and Information Technology in Higher Education*, EIP, Higher Education Division, DETYA, August 2000, 00/7, p 97.
[55] Ibid, p 109-110.

NIPAAC is concerned that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in rural and remote locations are disadvantaged both by lack of access to computer facilities and by poor telecommunications services in remote areas.[56] The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) comments that "the basic services that are available in many [remote] areas of the NT have insufficient capability or capacity to attach any computing network device, consequently can provide audible service only… So while IT is said to be available, the infrastructure in remote and rural areas is not necessarily effective… "[57] If students in remote areas do have reliable internet access, this may still require an STD phone call to log on if their Internet Service Provider (ISP) does not have a local area phone number. Few students receive financial support to provide electronic hardware and software, or to pay for ongoing CIT costs such as internet access or computer maintenance.

The University of Melbourne Student Support Committee advocates caution in lauding CIT as an "ideal solution" for reaching students at rural and remote sites.[58] As well as anxieties over equity of access to CIT equipment, the University identifies concerns about the reliability of CIT and the effect of diverting resources from other areas of the university to fund CIT development. For CIT to be an effective learning tool, there must be sufficient infrastructure to support this new technology. Students and staff at the University have experienced frustration over issues such as unreliable internet access, slow downloading times, and unreliable video conferencing technology and computer mediated conferencing limiting participation in discussions.[59]

The increasing use of CIT places more pressure on university staff. Students are able to contact staff electronically at any time with questions about course content and assessment, as opposed to visiting staff in person at a designated consultation hour. Academic staff will often be a student's first point of contact in the case of any technological difficulty with the course, regardless of whether or not the staff member has sufficient CIT expertise to resolve these problems. An increasing proportion of academic staff time is taken up responding to student emails. McCann et al. argue that, "student contact with lecturers and tutors is changing with the use of e-mail and computer based communication such as computer conferencing, with implications for student learning and staff

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[56] National Indigenous Postgraduate Association Aboriginal Corporation (NIPAAC), *Submission to the 2002 Ministerial Review of Higher Education*, June 2002, p 28. <http://www.capa.edu.au/aboriginal/Crossroads_submission.doc_31.doc>
[57] *Submission to the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission Inquiry into Rural and Remote Education in Australia from the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC)*, November 1999, <http://www.atsic.gov.au/issues/Disadvantage/Education/ HREOC_remote_education/default.asp>
[58] University of Melbourne Student Support Committee, *Diversity in Access and Delivery of Student Services: Project Report*, Draft Report, November 2001, p 32.
[59] Ibid.

workloads".[60] The University of Tasmania has also recognised the cost of CIT in terms of academic staff time. The University's submission to the 2001 Senate Inquiry into the capacity of public universities to meet Australia's higher education needs concluded that "the reality for those using online teaching effectively is that it opens up a wide range of new or enhanced communication opportunities between staff and students so that it can be extremely costly in terms of academic staff time".[61]

CIT support

In order to reap the benefits of CIT in distance education, it is vital for universities to provide CIT support for students and staff. Student surveys have demonstrated the need for CIT skills training, such as teaching students how to use particular software packages or how to undertake on-line research. Student surveys have also emphasised the need for CIT support to assist students with technical difficulties.

CIT skills training
SUPRA's survey of postgraduate coursework students at the University of Sydney (UTS) revealed that some students were struggling to gain the CIT skills necessary for their courses. Students made comments such as, "As I am developing my IT literacy, I found it difficult to do most of my learning by trial and error. I would have liked to have had the option to have extra learning opportunities in developing my computer literacy".[62] Similarly, nearly one third (29%) of the distance education students surveyed by USASA at the University of South Australia felt that they needed further IT training to effectively undertake their studies.[63] The USASA survey report concluded that "the need for the provision of additional training is significant".[64]

Barrakeet *et al*.'s report on the use of CIT at the University of Technology, Sydney recommends that universities provide free CIT skills training for students, recognising that those students most in need of skills development will often be the least able to pay for such training.

> As this study indicates, where new CIT applications are being employed, Universities must make provisions for the development of students' CIT skills necessary to ensure that the use of these applications is both efficient and effective. The cost of such training should not be borne by students, especially where the use of CIT is the only learning option

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[60] David McCann, Jenny Christmass, Peter Nicholson, Jeremy Stuparich, *Educational Technology in Higher Education*, Occasional Paper Series, Higher Education Division, DEETYA, March 1998, p 27.
[61] *Universities in Crisis*, 2001, p 173, s 5.85.
[62] Browne, Swinbourne and Harrod, 2000, p 49.
[63] Northway, 2002, p 28.
[64] Ibid, p 37.

available, or whether students (in particular those from designated equity groups) will be placed at a disadvantage if training is not provided.[65]

The report also recommends that CIT skills development programmes be sensitive to the issues faced by the particular groups of students identified as most in need of CIT skills support. The UTS survey revealed that older students, women and Indigenous students often did not have previous experience using CIT, and that training programmes needed to be developed that were sensitive and culturally appropriate, to avoid further alienating these groups of students.[66] The same students were also found to be less aware of the support services available to them, demonstrating a need for targeted university outreach programmes.[67]

Technology support
In addition to CIT skills development, both students and staff benefit from access to university CIT support services in order to obtain CIT advice and solve technology problems. For example, a Monash University academic whose students study entirely on-line regards technology compatibility and technology failure as being two of the most important issues for his students. Problems that his students have encountered include technology incompatibility where students' computers "won't talk" to university computers (and vice versa), and students being unable to log on following an update of the course's delivery platform.[68] Academic staff may not have the sophisticated CIT skills required to solve such technology problems, thus students need to have access to university CIT support systems in order to rectify any technological difficulties.

> To increase access to higher education, universities should accompany their use of new CIT applications in distance education with a commitment to extending access to CIT equipment, providing CIT skills development programmes, and creating efficient CIT support systems for staff and students. Strategies can include:
> - Expanding opening hours of university computer laboratories, to provide access for distance education students who are only able to travel to the university campus outside working hours;
> - Ensuring that all students have remote access to a university email account;
> - Developing a supply of university CIT equipment such as lap-top computers, modems, and software that can be loaned to students;
> - Providing financial support to students from designated equity groups to assist with the purchase of CIT equipment;
> - Developing a university student network for the sale and purchase of second-hand CIT equipment;

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[65] Barrakeet *et al.*, 2002, p 124.
[66] Ibid, p 125.
[67] Ibid, p 69.
[68] Personal communication between Monash academic staff member and Monash Postgraduate Association (MPA) office bearer, 17 March 2003.

- Providing sensitive and culturally appropriate CIT skills development programmes;
- Ensuring that all students and staff involved in courses requiring the use of CIT have access to university support systems to resolve any technology failures; and
- Conducting targeted outreach campaigns to promote university services among students who may not be aware of the support available.

Quality of course delivery

Quality of course content, course materials and course delivery all contribute to distance education students' satisfaction with their educational experience. Surveys of postgraduate coursework students at the University of Sydney and Curtin University show that externally enrolled students tend to be less satisfied with their courses than internally enrolled students. At the University of Sydney, external students were more likely to report dissatisfaction than both full-time and part-time internal students. "When dichotomised, the dissatisfaction rating for external students, at 28.3%, is notably higher than the other categories (23.9% and 22.4% for full-time and part-time respectively) and the overall dissatisfaction level. This suggests that it would be in the university's best interests to review its provision of distance education with a view toward increasing student satisfaction".[69]

At Curtin University, some external students commented on the poor quality of distance education material.[70] This included dissatisfaction with the quality of photocopied material as well as on-line material.[71] In reference to Curtin's extensive use of WebCT as a learning tool for distance education, the CUPSA report cautioned that "this does not necessarily mean that all units can be delivered through all media, as some forms are better suited to some unit content than other forms … there is a significant correlation between delivery via appropriate media and satisfaction".[72]

At the University of Sydney, some external postgraduate coursework students have expressed dissatisfaction with the on-campus residential school components of their degree. Students made comments such as:

> Given that the entire face-to-face content of this course was a one-week residential school, I was very disappointed that the lecturers turned up late and were disorganised. Not value for money at all - especially after having paid for airfares to get there!

> My course is run as an external course with 2 study blocks per year. The study blocks required attendance at Sydney campus for lectures etc. but a lot of this time was allotted to free study/library time. My

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[69] Brown, Swinbourne and Harrod, 2000, p 11.
[70] Rashford and Dowsett, 2001, p 34.
[71] Ibid, p 61.
[72] Ibid, p 56.

attendance at these study blocks required much expense (I live in another state) and the value for money was poorer than expected.[73]

SUPRA's recommendation to the University of Sydney, "that the university review the provision of distance education with a view to improving both quality of course content and associated administrative functions",[74] is relevant to all universities wanting to guarantee the quality of their distance education. Such reviews should be conducted regularly.

Access to university resources

University policies differ in the extent to which they make university resources available to external students. While all enrolled students may be eligible to use university resources such as libraries or computer laboratories, the capacity to do so obviously depends on the student's physical proximity to the university.

Postgraduate association surveys of coursework students have identified library access as a key concern for external students. For example, student responses to the CUPSA survey included the criticism that, "the library is absolutely inflexible in relation to borrowing, particularly in regard to external students…"[75] and the recommendation that library services be improved.[76] The survey of postgraduate coursework students at Deakin, Monash, RMIT and Swinburne found that:

> Provision of and access to good library services was the most dominant resource/service to feature in the results of this survey. There was no indication from respondents that this need is being replaced by alternative electronic sources (original emphasis), internet access in comparison being ancillary. The importance of libraries and printed materials to coursework postgraduates is paramount.

Postgraduate coursework student surveys have all recommended that library opening hours be extended, particularly to cater for the needs of students who may work full time. Of particular use to distance education students may be the employment of a specialist distance education librarian to deal exclusively with the library needs of distance students. Student feedback from the University of Sydney has been positive about the value of this position. The SUPRA survey of postgraduate coursework students includes one external student's praise of the "excellent service by the distance education librarian".[77] An academic at Monash University, teaching several distance education courses, has found that distance students at that university have benefited from on-line information about available library resources. He comments, "we struggled for ages to get proper access [for distance students] to library and other facilities enjoyed by on campus students.

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[73] Brown, Swibourne and Harrod, 2002, p 51.
[74] Ibid, p x, Recommendation 4.
[75] Rashford and Dowsett, 2001, p 18.
[76] Ibid., p 31
[77] Brown, Swinbourne, and Harrod, 2000, p 12.

One way we got around it was to design an online 'orientation day' which seems to work very well."[78]

> Resources such as libraries and computer laboratories should be accessible to external as well as internal students. Strategies for improving access to university resources for external students include:
> - Extending evening and weekend opening hours of university libraries in order to improve access for external students whose decision to study externally is motivated by full time employment rather than distance from campus.
> - Employing staff to work specifically with distance students, such as specialist distance education librarians.
> - Ensuring that clear information about university resources is available on university websites.
> - Removing any additional charges for external student access to university resources.

Access to student support services

Student support services[79] must now cater for the needs of a more diverse range of students, who are located across a variety of campuses or studying externally. As discussed earlier, over the past decade the student population has become older and more students are enrolled externally or on a part-time basis. In the post-Dawkins Unified National System, university amalgamations with Colleges of Advanced Education and VET sector institutions have often produced multi-campus institutions. Many universities have both city and rural campuses which are physically distant.

Ten years ago, the Department of Education, Employment and Training (now DEST) advised that "the ability of the student support service to adapt to the changing demands and usage habits of a constantly shifting student population is essential for the continued relevance of that service to its community".[80] Promnitz and Germain argue that universities have an added incentive to support student welfare in a competitive higher education sector: "…as recruitment of students becomes a more competitive exercise, the quality and availability of various support services within a university form an important element in defining

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[78] Personal communication between Monash academic staff member and Monash Postgraduate Association (MPA) office bearer, 17 March 2003.

[79] Student support services include 'learning services', such as study skills advice and training workshops; 'survival services', such as counselling, health and employment services; 'advisory services' such as student advocacy, careers and financial advice; 'recreational services', such as student fitness centres and sports facilities; and 'general services', such as bookshops. See Jenny Promnitz and Carmen Germain, *Student Support Services and Academic Outcomes: Achieving Positive Outcomes*, Evaluations and Investigations Program, Higher Education Division, Department of Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs (DEETYA), 96/10, October 1996, Chapter 2: 'Definitions'.

[80] Cited in University of Melbourne Student Support Committee, 2001, p 32.

an institution's quality and competitiveness."[81] The University of Melbourne has summarised the challenge for student support services: "As student habits and behaviours change, student services must respond in ways which are efficient, are free or involve only minimum costs to students, are available on an equitable basis and are sufficiently flexible to meet changing client needs".[82]

Student surveys reveal that students may not be aware of the support services available to them. At Curtin University, Rashford and Dowsett conclude that, "it would seem that postgraduate coursework students were not provided with relevant information by the university about the facilities and resources allocated to them to support their course".[83] The University of Melbourne has responded to this problem by establishing the 'Diversity in Access and Delivery of Services Project' (discussed in more detail below). The goals of the Project include increasing staff and student awareness of the availability and accessibility of various student services.[84] Several postgraduate student associations, including UMPA (University of Melbourne Postgraduate Association) and WUPA (Wollongong University Postgraduate Association) employ an Outreach Officer whose role includes increasing external students' awareness of the support services provided by their postgraduate student association.

Universities and postgraduate associations also need to ensure that the support services are relevant to the needs of external students and students who are not studying at the university's 'main' campus. The USASA survey of distance education students emphasised that "to improve the services of the Students Association to external students, it is clear that greater attention needs to be given to rural, interstate and overseas students, in order to provide some level of equity in support and access to relevant services."[85] Students' responses to the USASA survey revealed that students would like:
▪ more services focused on the specific needs of external students;
▪ more information about university and student association services;
▪ swifter responses to queries;
▪ more personal contact rather than relying on on-line information; and
▪ more support in finding accommodation when attending workshops.

Students responded positively to:
▪ the Student Association's Externals Orientation Day;
▪ the diary and wall planner produced by the Association;
▪ the newsletter for external students;
▪ regional visits and personal contact from the Association; and
▪ the Student Association's employment of a designated External Student Advisory Officer.[86]

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[81] Promnitz and Germain, 1996, p 2 (on-line).
[82] University of Melbourne Student Support Committee, 2001, p 35.
[83] Rashford and Dowsett, 2001, p 24.
[84] University of Melbourne Student Support Committee, 2001, p 3.
[85] Northway, 2002, p 37.
[86] Ibid, p 33.

Diversity in Access and Delivery of Student Services Project

As mentioned above, the University of Melbourne Student Support Committee has established a project to improve diversity in access and delivery of student services at the university. The project involves student associations, the School of Graduate Studies, and a number of student support services. The goal of the project is to ensure that student support services at the university are responsive to the increasing geographical diversity of students following recent expansion.

The Project has made a number of policy recommendations, many of which may be relevant to the support services of other Australian universities. The project report recommends:
- drafting a strategic plan to establish the minimum level of services for all students and to establish service benchmarks and delivery standards;[87]
- committing "a representative, manageable proportion of the activity of all services … to meeting the needs of regional and remote students and staff";[88]
- creating a dedicated Services Liaison Officer for regional and remote sites, as an avenue for staff and students to address any difficulties they may have accessing student support services;
- developing a Diversity Map profiling the location, numbers and types of staff and students at the University to dispel the misconception that all staff and students are located on the university's main Parkville campus; and
- developing Student Guides in consultation with campus staff and students regarding student services access and related topics such as supporting students with special needs.[89]

The overwhelming message from surveys of students at a variety of Australian universities is that student support services need to cater for the needs of external students and that universities and student associations need to promote the services they provide more vigorously. External student surveys are a valuable tool to determine whether the needs of external students are being met.

To summarise, strategies to improve access to student support services can include:
- creating a dedicated Services Liaison Officer for students who are not studying on the main university campus;
- developing Student Guides to provide information and contact details for student support services available to external students;
- surveying external student to determine their support needs and evaluate whether these are being met;
- promoting university support services and postgraduate association services among external students.

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[87] University of Melbourne Student Support Committee, 2001, p 3.
[88] Ibid, p 4.
[89] Ibid, pp 33-34.

Distance education extends equity of access to higher education to those who are unable to attend a university campus, such as rural and remote students, students in full time employment, students with children, students with disabilities, and students without formal education qualifications. However, the paradox of distance education is that these groups of students may be the least equipped to cope with the isolation, frustration, and technological difficulties that they may encounter. For this reason, it is vital that equity of access to higher education is accompanied by equity of access to student support.

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