

# Student Persistence in a LIS Distance Education Program

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*ABSTRACT* In a series of focus groups, past and present distance students of the Master of Library and Information Studies (MLIS) at Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand, were interviewed to establish which factors they believed enabled them to persist with their program. Related issues, such as reasons for enrolling, expectations, and barriers to learning, were also explored. The students identified receiving support, managing the workload, and personal factors as the key elements that helped them to persist with their studies. In addition, Auckland-based participants believed that they benefited considerably from regular face-to-face contact with tutors and fellow students.

Distance students often face a number of barriers to completing their education. Factors such as lack of support, isolation and lack of motivation can contribute to a dropout rate that is often higher than that of classroom-based courses.<sup>1</sup> The question of what makes students persist despite these barriers has been a focus of many studies of distance education. However, in library and information science (LIS) education research, the experience of the distance student has, until recently, been little examined.

In order to address the above, this study investigated the perspectives and experiences of distance education students in the Master of Library and Information Studies (MLIS) program at Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand (VUW).<sup>2</sup> Specifically, it sought to understand which factors distance students believed enabled them to persevere with the program, and consequently to make recommendations on the steps students and LIS staff could take to facilitate the journey through the degree.

## Background

VUW's Library and Information Studies program is taught by the School of Information Management (SIM), and has been available by distance since 1992. Originally, the distance education courses were taught using a combination of weekly audio-conferences and print-based modules. In 2001, web-based modules were introduced, using Blackboard – an e-learning system that enables course material to be presented online in a multimedia format, and which includes tools such as discussion boards and group discussion areas. At the time the study was undertaken, Blackboard was being used in combination with audio-conferencing and print modules for most of the distance courses.

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All students were assigned personal tutors, with whom it was intended they could discuss matters not directly related to individual papers (or subjects). In addition, two tutors were employed in the largest centre, Auckland, to facilitate the teaching of the core papers, and provide organisational and academic support for the students there. Also, lecturers travelled to Auckland approximately twice per trimester to hold Saturday morning classes for the core modules.

Distance students had internet access to the VUW library catalogue – initially through TELNET, but since 2002, through a web-based version. In addition, a portal established in 2001 in conjunction with the Internet Access Provider, Paradise, gave distance students online access to VUW library fulltext and abstract databases.

### The Research

As a review of the related literature revealed no single theoretical perspective that was particularly suited to the objectives of the research, previous studies of persistence in distance education were examined for ideas and themes that could guide an analysis of the findings. Notable among these were Taylor's theory of orientations to learning, summarised by Beaty, Gibbs, and Morgan in Table 1 and, more recently, the research into distance students' sense of online 'communities'.<sup>3</sup>

**Table 1**  
**Student's Learning Orientations**  
**From Beaty, Gibbs, and Morgan<sup>4</sup>**

Orientation	Interest	Aim	Concerns
Vocational	Intrinsic	Training	Relevance of course to future career
	Extrinsic	Qualification	Recognition of qualification's worth
Academic	Intrinsic	Intellectual interest	Choosing stimulating lectures
	Extrinsic	Educational progress	Grades and academic progress
Personal	Intrinsic	Broadening or self-improvement	Challenging, interesting material
	Extrinsic	Compensation or proof of capability	Feedback and passing the course
Social	Extrinsic	Having a good time	Facilities for sport and social activities

The literature review found a surfeit of studies that compared on-campus learning with distance learning, a heavy reliance on the use of surveys in distance learning research, and a lack of qualitative studies examining distance learning from the students' perspective. For these reasons, the present study was undertaken using open-ended qualitative methodology.

Focus groups were chosen in order to allow students to express their own perceptions of the barriers they faced in distance learning, and the factors that kept them going. Prior to the focus group sessions, the questions were tested in a pilot study with a group of six current and former distance students of the MLIS. Testing the interview instrument in this way helped establish whether the questions elicited responses that were relevant to the research objectives, and meant that the prospective length of the sessions could be gauged.

Three focus group sessions were then held, with two groups consisting of participants at certain stages in the program, and one group of recent graduates. Participants were given the option of either attending the Auckland-based sessions in person, or joining in by audio-conference through the use of a free-phone 0800 number. Details of the final focus groups are shown in Table 2.

**Table 2**  
**Composition of Focus Groups**

	Consisting of	Date/time	Format	No of participants
<b>Group 1</b>	Former distance students	18 February 2003; 6:00-7:30pm	Audio-conference only	6
<b>Group 2</b>	Distance students in 2nd or 3rd year	26 February 2003; 6:00-7:30pm	Mix: audio-conference/in person	7
<b>Group 3</b>	Distance students in first year	5 March 2003; 6:00-7:30pm	Mix: audio-conference/in person	5

In addition to the central question on persistence, participants were asked about their reasons for studying, their expectations of distance learning and how these compared with the reality, the barriers they faced, and the advice they would give to LIS staff and prospective students. The answers to these questions helped provide a framework for understanding their experiences.

Following the sessions, tape recordings of the focus groups were transcribed and analysed in line with the procedure recommended by Vaughn, Schumm and Sinagub.<sup>5</sup> Themes were then drawn from the data, with reference to the information already gathered in the literature review.

## **Findings**

### **Why students choose to study the MLIS by distance**

#### *Choosing the MLIS*

The concept of learning orientations (Table 1) was used as a framework for understanding students' reasons for enrolling in the MLIS. The data showed that almost every participant undertook the MLIS for vocational reasons. In addition, the majority cited extrinsic reasons for enrolling in the degree – that is, their primary concern lay in obtaining the qualification, rather than in the content of the training. Of those already working in a library environment at the time of enrolment, most viewed the degree as important or essential in advancing their career. The bulk of participants in the study was somewhat or very new to libraries, and was looking for a career change or to re-enter the workforce. Most viewed the Masters as a way to enter and move ahead in the field. However, obtaining a library qualification was not the only motivation for enrolling. Intrinsic reasons, such as learning or updating skills were also given, although to a lesser extent.

Although two groups each had a participant who objected to the thought of taking the degree just for the resulting 'piece of paper,' the overwhelming response from all three groups was that it was the obtaining of this piece of paper that was the primary motivation for enrolling.

#### *Choosing Distance Learning*

Most participants did not feel that they had an option when it came to selecting distance learning over on-campus classes. They made it clear that factors such as family (predominantly) and work commitments meant they could not move to Wellington to take up the campus-based program.

A few students also commented that the perceived positive benefits of studying by distance had also had a bearing on their decision. The ability to work while studying, thus simultaneously earning money and gaining relevant experience, was identified as an advantage of the distance program. In addition, a number of students reported having had previous good experiences of distance learning, and appeared to factor this into their decision.

### **Expectations and Outcomes**

Students' expectations of distance learning fell into three main domains: expectations regarding workload, expectations of flexible learning, and expectations of isolation.

#### *Workload*

In its 2002 LIS Administration Handbook,<sup>6</sup> the School of Information Management advised that each MLIS paper would entail a workload of approximately 10-15 hours per week. Students in two of the groups

remembered and cited these figures. In addition, participants who had spoken to past MLIS students about distance learning often found their expectations of a heavy workload reinforced.

There were varied responses as to whether these figures were perceived to be an accurate reflection of the workload. Some participants indicated that in reality there was more variation in the number of weekly hours spent on study – some weeks less, and some a lot more, particularly when assignments were due. One student felt that ten hours a week underestimated ‘how much pressure it puts on your home life.’ Others viewed the guidelines as being helpful and realistic.

### *Flexible learning*

It is common for students to expect that learning by distance will mean flexibility of time and pace when studying.<sup>7</sup> In the focus groups, this expectation was particularly held by those who had already had some experience of distance learning. However, participants found the MLIS more structured than they had anticipated, and that it did not really allow for self-paced learning.

### *Isolation (Auckland students)*

Several of the Auckland students, having expected to work mainly in isolation, reported being surprised at the regular face-to-face contact with tutors and other students. This and other perceived benefits of being an Auckland-based student was a notable theme to emerge from the study, and will be discussed further below.

### **Barriers to Distance Learning**

Four clear areas emerged when students discussed the barriers they faced: support issues; access to resources; personal factors and coursework issues. Concerns regarding technology also featured heavily in the discussions.

### *Support Issues*

It became clear that, where students perceived a lack of support – ie of technical support, where there was poor communication, or where they felt isolated – they saw this as a considerable barrier to their progress.

### *Technical support*

Many students commented on problems they encountered with technology, a common concern of distance education students.<sup>8</sup> For most, their issues lay not so much in the original technical problem, but rather in feeling unsupported in their efforts to try to resolve the problem. Lack of a single point of contact was a particular issue, brought up in all three focus groups.

Students' need for technical support came up again when participants talked about the advice they thought LIS staff should give to prospective distance students. Several participants wanted more advice on the technological aspects of the course. Some suggested giving practical assistance, such as tutorials held in advance of the program. One student observed, however, that, as students entered the course with varying levels of computer skills, such practical classes should fall outside normal class teaching time.

#### Communication

Problems of communication with the teaching and administrative staff featured strongly in students' discussions of barriers to distance learning. These included:

- lack of, or late notification about changes to the program,
- slow or inconsistent feedback on assignments,
- difficulties in contacting on-campus staff, and
- little contact from personal tutors (reported by students based outside Auckland).

#### Isolation

Feelings of isolation fell into two categories – isolation from faculty, and isolation from fellow students. In particular, participants who had no face-to-face contact with other students found that this made the learning experience more difficult. It was primarily students outside Auckland who raised isolation as an issue. As already noted, many Auckland students had been pleasantly surprised that it had not been the problem they had expected.

It was noticeable that, despite the fact that students who were learning in isolation had regular encounters with other students, either electronically or through audio-conferences, it was often the conversations and social relationships that took place outside these occurrences that they missed out on.

#### *Access to Resources*

Previous studies have shown that distance students can be frustrated when trying to gain access to resources, either physically or electronically.<sup>9</sup> The most common access issue to emerge from the focus groups was difficulty in getting physical access to library resources. Some participants found the delay in delivery of materials a problem, some lamented not being able to browse through the books, and others were dissatisfied with the service they received. Several of the students stated that they made use of their local libraries or the internet, rather than using VUW's distance library services. In some instances it appeared that, where a student had had a negative experience with the library, they were not prepared to try using it again.

In addition, the issue of problems with electronic access to either the library catalogue, or to the fulltext databases provided through a web-portal was raised in every focus group.

### *External Pressures*

Students often had many commitments outside the MLIS program, such as family and work obligations. They had to juggle these commitments against the demands that distance learning made on their time. In addition, many participants found themselves giving up or cutting down on leisure activities, such as reading for pleasure, socialising with friends, and exercise.

### *Coursework Issues*

Issues such as the quantity of required readings, and problems with individual instructors or papers were raised in the groups, but as such concerns could apply equally to on-campus students as to distance students, they were not explored further. Another issue that came up to a greater or lesser extent in all three focus groups was the difficulties faced by students who lacked practical experience in libraries. Some of these students stated that they had had problems understanding the terms or concepts used in the classes.

### **What kept Students Going**

Three clear themes emerged regarding persistence: support, managing the workload, and personal factors. In addition, the experience of the Auckland students was notably different from that of their peers around the country.

### *Support*

It has already been noted above that where distance students perceived a lack of support, they viewed this as a considerable hindrance to learning. The importance of feeling supported was further indicated by the fact that the majority of students identified it as one of the most important factors in helping them to persist. Participants brought up the importance of support from fellow students and family, friends or work colleagues.

### *Fellow students*

Just as those participants studying on their own cited isolation as a difficulty of distance learning, it was noticeable that students who were able to gather together in groups for audio-conferences perceived this as an important factor in helping them to get through the program. Often it was the relationships that were developed before and after the audio-conference sessions that were especially valued. Regular meetings with fellow students meant that participants had the opportunity to bond and learn from each other.

### Family, friends and work

Several participants felt boosted by the understanding and encouragement of family and friends, especially when they were finding things particularly difficult. Those already working in a library environment also appreciated the interest, support, and advice of work colleagues. Support from workplace management received barely a mention, although it was unclear as to whether this was due to there being a lack of support, or whether it was not perceived as important.

### *Managing the Workload*

Several participants had taken steps to aid their own progress through the program, such as planning the sequence and number of papers they took, reducing their hours at work, or cutting down on the course readings. Participants thought that students should know as much about the papers in advance as possible. Prior knowledge of course content, number and type of assignments, as well as information about the lecturer – for example, his or her marking style, or use of the e-learning system Blackboard – was seen as important in helping students to prepare for and plan the learning experience. Participants believed that prospective students then needed to think about these factors in relation to their own lives and prior commitments, and make adjustments as necessary.

### *Personal Factors*

Many respondents also viewed their own personal drive and determination as having played an important role in keeping them going. Although most participants had viewed the obtaining of a 'piece of paper' as their initial reason for enrolling in the program, it emerged that on a day-to-day basis, factors such as personal resolve played an important role in keeping them there.

### *The Auckland Experience*

In a study of persistence factors, the fact that students based in Auckland since 2000 appeared to have had a quite different experience from their counterparts in the rest of New Zealand could not be overlooked. While Auckland participants faced many of the same barriers as other students – for example, technical problems and external pressures on their time – there were two problems that, on the whole, they did not appear to encounter: isolation, and lack of communication. Students were quick to nominate the support they received from tutors, the regular face-to-face contact with fellow students, and having the lecturers come to Auckland in person, as valuable factors in helping them to persevere.

## Discussion

Although the research was limited to a small group of participants, and was not intended to be statistically representative, many of the findings correlate to results reported in earlier studies.

### Why students choose to study the MLIS by distance

#### *Choosing the MLIS*

Most of the students gave vocational extrinsic reasons for enrolling in the MLIS. This corresponds to the findings of Marcella and Baxter,<sup>10</sup> who determined that a significant number of the LIS distance students in their study had enrolled in a postgraduate degree in order to enhance their career prospects, or gain a professionally recognised qualification. This said, it became evident from the current study that students sometimes *did* have an intrinsic interest in their studies, even if this did not emerge as their primary reason for enrolling in the degree. For example, some students commented that they felt motivated when they could match what they were learning to their professional experience. Others criticised papers where they felt the content was irrelevant to their work or future career. These attitudes demonstrate an intrinsic interest in the content of the program, even if the students were not overtly aware of it.

In addition, it was found that students were more likely to cite intrinsic personal factors, such as their own drive and determination, that kept them going rather than just the perceived end result of the 'piece of paper'. This reflects the fact that students frequently have more than one learning orientation, and also that learning orientations can change over the course of the program – something acknowledged by Beaty, Gibbs, and Morgan.<sup>11</sup>

#### *Choosing Distance Learning*

Compared with the number of studies on the experiences of distance students after enrolment, there are relatively few studies on why students enrol in distance learning programs in the first place. An interesting point to emerge from the data in this study was that many participants expressed their reasons in 'negative' rather than 'positive' terms. That is, they gave explanations that dealt more with the factors that prevented them from taking up on-campus study, than with the attractions of distance learning. Wallace labels this 'pushes' (registration in independent study as a response to a barrier to on-campus study) and 'pulls' (registration in independent study because of its special appeal)<sup>12</sup> There appears to be a lack of research into whether a student's enrolling in a distance course because of 'negative' reasons has any influence on his or her learning experience. If it does, the influence is perhaps likely to be limited. However, it is important for educators to recognise that, while students may be grateful for the opportunity of studying by distance, it may not be their preferred method of learning.

### **Expectations and Outcomes**

Distance students' expectations about learning is another factor that can influence their learning experience.<sup>13</sup> From the current study, it appears that students formed their expectations based on interactions with VUW, discussions with previous MLIS students, and on any prior experiences they had of distance learning. While it is not possible to influence the last two factors, institutions can play an important role in ensuring students have realistic expectations of distance study.

When asked to think back to their expectations of learning by distance, several students stated that they had read about the expected time commitment for each paper. Apart from this, however, it appeared that many students could not remember much other pre-course advice from VUW on distance learning. Having prior information about the program so that they could accurately plan their course of study was clearly important to participants, and the importance of this has been highlighted in earlier reports.<sup>14</sup> It is further backed up by research into online students' experiences undertaken by Choy, McNickle and Clayton, who found that the students' primary expectation for pre-enrolment and enrolment services was to receive detailed information about what would be required to complete the course.<sup>15</sup>

### **Barriers to Distance Learning**

Problems with technology, a common concern for distance education students, was one of the most prominent issues to emerge from the focus groups. That students are expected to bring a certain level of computer literacy to the program is pointed out in the LIS Administration Handbook.<sup>16</sup> However, students enrol with varying levels of familiarity with technological features such as e-learning and discussion lists, and this was clearly a cause of frustration to those who were less used to them. Choy, McNickle and Clayton's study found that online students' primary expectations regarding technical support were for quick responses to technical problems and easy access to technical assistance.<sup>17</sup> It appeared that the expectations of the participants in this study were no different, and that they were annoyed if they found that the reality turned out to be different from the expectation.

Distance students' problems with isolation feature repeatedly in discussions of distance learning difficulties.<sup>18</sup> Students in this study reported having difficulties when they felt isolated from their lecturers or fellow students. These feelings appeared to arise more often among non-Auckland students, and were, at times, exacerbated by a perceived lack of communication from the School. Despite the Administration Handbook's advice that students should initiate contact with their personal tutors,<sup>19</sup> it appeared that the students were in fact waiting for the first approach to come from faculty. This finding echoes earlier studies,<sup>20</sup> which have found students studying by distance often

unwilling to contact institution staff until an issue had become a major problem.

The problem of access to library resources, either hard copy or electronic, arose in all three focus groups. Issues with the library catalogue related mainly to the TELNET system, which has since been superseded by a web-based catalogue. The problem of students not having first-hand access to the material on the library shelves was addressed to some degree by the introduction of web-portal access to fulltext journals. However, many participants reported difficulties in connecting to the databases. Although this may have been due to the teething problems of a system in its first year of operation, it was clearly a source of frustration, and was compounded by what many students perceived as a lack of technical support. Yet when the portal system did work, it was described by one student as 'brilliant'.

A further barrier to learning that emerged from the study was the issue of students having to balance distance learning with their own personal commitments. Many participants were already in full- or part-time employment, or had significant family obligations, and were trying to fit distance study in around this. Previous studies have also discussed the difficulties distance students face in juggling a number of different commitments.<sup>21</sup> The current study found, like Kazmer and Haythornthwaite<sup>22</sup>, that students had sacrificed aspects of their lives in order to incorporate distance learning.

The final main finding on barriers to distance learning was the difficulties encountered by some students who were not working in libraries. It was not only the disadvantage of being new to the terms and concepts that they faced. One of the points to emerge from the study was that students perceived considerable benefit in being able to apply what they learnt in class to their working environment. Those not working in libraries obviously did not have this ability. They also did not benefit from the support and advice of fellow colleagues in the profession. These results were similar to those of Kazmer and Haythornthwaite, who found that distance LIS students working in unrelated fields craved contact with the profession and, unlike students in library related work fields, did not receive recognition or understanding of their educational goals from their co-workers.<sup>23</sup>

While the last two points could apply equally well to on-campus students as to those studying by distance, they have been included here as matters that the participants clearly felt affected them, as distance students, in particular. A possible reason for this may be that they perceived those on-campus to be full-time students and thus more able to immerse themselves in student life, or more likely to receive support and advice from their peers in the surrounding university environment.

### **What kept Students Going**

The study identified the key themes of support, management of the workload, and personal factors as being the main elements that participants believed enabled them to persevere with the program. In addition, Auckland students saw their learning experience as different to those in the rest of the country, and perceived that they had benefited because of it.

#### *Support*

Participants valued the support of their fellow students, friends and family, and co-workers. It was clear that those students who were able to meet up for regular classes viewed the interaction with classmates as very important in contributing to a positive experience of the program, and it appeared that these students often had a well-developed sense of community. The responses from students able to attend audio-conferences as a group would seem to support Tinto's theory that '... students will increase their levels of satisfaction and the likelihood of persisting in a college program if they feel involved and develop relationships with other members of the community'.<sup>24</sup> It was noticeable, however, that students studying in isolation did not appear to have formed such relationships, or had done so to a much lesser extent. These students had to find other ways to make social contact with their peers. One student working on her own recommended that other distance students '...send friendly emails to other students. Chat after the audio-conference, get to know people...'. This reflects Haythornthwaite et al.'s finding that distance students need to make a more conscious effort to maintain ties in with their peers than those who are able to meet face-to-face.<sup>25</sup>

According to Haythornthwaite et al., one way of building community amongst distance (in their case, online) students is to encourage synchronous communication.<sup>26</sup> In the present study, weekly audio-conferences were one such example of synchronous activity. However, they did not allow much opportunity for students to form personal relationships. The use of internet chatrooms, already utilised to a degree in some MLIS papers, is another way synchronous activity could be promoted. However, as the findings on other computer-related issues have demonstrated, it would be necessary to make certain that students were well prepared for using the chatrooms, that technical problems were ironed out in advance, and that students had quick and easy access to technical support, in order to ensure that the experience was a positive one rather than a negative.

One student studying in isolation found that group assignments helped him considerably, as they had brought him into closer contact with other students. For this reason, he recommended that group assignments be set earlier in the program, rather than later. The value to distance students of working in groups is supported by the results of Hiltz's study into virtual classrooms, which found

that '... working in groups, instead of alone, significantly increases motivation, perception of skill development and solution satisfaction'.<sup>27</sup>

The value of the support of family, friends and work colleagues has received less attention in the literature, perhaps because it is beyond the control of learning institutions to do anything about. The demands of studying often left participants less able to invest time and energy in personal relationships. Despite, or perhaps because of this, they genuinely appreciated the encouragement and understanding of those close to them. McCahon found similarly that support from home, work and family was likely to have '... a profound effect on the social integration of students – their ability to manage the many roles of their adult lives with the demands of study'.<sup>28</sup>

### *Managing the Workload*

Participants believed that both individual students and VUW staff had a role to play in ensuring students managed their workload effectively. Positive steps that students could take included talking to previous students about the course, finding out about the content and structure of individual papers, planning the sequence of papers in advance, and cutting back on work hours. Faculty and support staff could assist by not scheduling due dates for assignments in different courses too close together, sending out course materials in plenty of time for the course, giving early guidance on possible topics for research projects, and providing advance warning where elective papers were likely to be unavailable. The timely return of assignments, and consistency of marking styles among lecturers were also seen as important.

### *Personal Factors*

An in-depth analysis of participants' personal characteristics was beyond the scope of this study. However, many students viewed personal traits such as pride and determination as important in keeping them in the program.

### *The Auckland Experience*

The perceived success of the Auckland program can be largely attributed to the fact that students missed out on some of the 'barriers', such as isolation and lack of communication, and encountered more of the 'persistence factors' – face-to-face support from, and interaction with, classmates, tutors and lecturers.

Obviously, it is not possible to recreate the Auckland experience in every town in New Zealand. However, some of the factors that make Auckland successful could be incorporated into the program for students in the rest of the country, and may also have wider application for distance learning courses elsewhere. For example, a sense of community could be encouraged by giving students more opportunity for synchronous communication, monitoring and supporting their levels of interaction in classes, and fostering communication outside the parameters of the weekly audio-conferences. In addition, they may

benefit from the scheduling of group assignments early in the first trimester, so that they have an opportunity to form early bonds with each other.

Issues of isolation from faculty could be addressed by increasing communication from the personal tutors, particularly at the beginning of the program. As Mynott, Thebridge, and Shoolbred found,<sup>29</sup> it does not appear to be enough just to give students the name and contact details of their tutor, as there is no guarantee that they will follow this up. Yet, when tutors are readily available, as in Auckland, students highly value their presence. It seems that if students were to receive initial contact from the tutors, they would be more likely to make use of them. This would improve their feelings of connection to the university, thereby improving their overall experience of distance learning.

## **Conclusions and Recommendations**

The purpose of this study was to investigate the factors that distance students believed enabled them to persevere with the MLIS program. It was exploratory in nature, and did not seek to reach conclusions that could necessarily be generalised to the wider distance education community. It should also be noted that the findings have been drawn from the New Zealand context in which the research was based, and may not have wider application outside the country.

Nevertheless, a goal of the research was to make recommendations on the steps that both students and staff could take to facilitate progress through the MLIS program. Based on an analysis of the results of the study, together with themes identified in the related literature, the following recommendations can be made:

Distance students can aid their progress by:

- thoroughly examining their reasons for enrolling in the MLIS,
- finding out as much as possible about the program and papers in advance,
- planning their course of study, while also allowing flexibility for change,
- thinking about the changes that distance learning is likely to make to their lives, and making adjustments to accommodate these changes,
- making a conscious effort to form early bonds with fellow students, and to maintain these bonds over the course of the program, and
- being proactive in approaching staff for help and advice.

LIS staff can help distance students by:

- giving students advice on the planning of their course of study, and ensuring they are aware of what to expect from the program,
- making contact with individual students early in the program – particularly with those students for whom they are the personal tutor,
- promoting interaction between students – for example, by scheduling group assignments at the beginning of the program, and by monitoring students' participation in synchronous activities such as audio-conferences and chatrooms,

- keeping students informed about changes to the program,
- providing prompt, consistent feedback, and
- ensuring that students have access to fast, accurate technical support, ideally in the form of a single point of contact.

In addition, those providing library services to distance students should aim for a fast turnaround of requests and prompt resolution of problems – particularly those relating to technical access to resources.

Despite – or perhaps because of – the technological advances that make distance education programs increasingly possible, the study showed that it was largely the human factors that were of most importance to students. This finding was exemplified by the observations of Auckland participants, and the enthusiasm they shared for the face-to-face contact they had with tutors, instructors and other students.

While it is acknowledged that budgetary and time restrictions may make implementation of all of the above recommendations difficult, the findings of this study can nevertheless give distance students and library educators a better awareness of the distance learning experience. Armed with this awareness, both parties have the opportunity to ensure that the students' chances of persistence are increased.

### Acknowledgements

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### Notes

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- 2 This paper is an abridged version of a research paper submitted to the School of Information Management, Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand, in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Library and Information Studies in 2002. A copy of the full paper is held in the university library.
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