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## **Distance learners: Connected, mobile and resourceful individuals**

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In recent years the student experience of higher education in general and distance education in particular has been strongly influenced by the wide scale uptake of Internet based learning approaches and an expanding distance education market, amongst many other trends. As competition within the sector increases because of access to the WWW and other in-country socio-political influences, the push to attract and retain students is becoming a key issue for institutions. Understanding the distance student's voice in relation to these trends and developing appropriate responses to ensure a satisfactory learning experience is of critical importance. This paper reports on a recently completed study that explored the distance learners' experience at one dual-mode Australian institution. The paper outlines a rationale for investigating the student voice to meet the unique needs of the distance learner. It describes the approaches that were adopted to undertake the research and discusses some of the main themes that emerged from the study - individualness, connectedness, quality, mobility, and resourcefulness. The paper concludes with considerations for policy and practice in relation to utilising the distance learners' voice in enhancing distance learners' experiences.

### **Introduction**

During the last decade several trends have influenced distance education. These trends include rapid growth in distance education and particularly online learning (Allen & Seaman, 2008; 2010); the widespread adoption of information and communication technologies (ICT) to support teaching and learning activities (Guri-Rozenblit, 2009); the merging of modes of learning (Guri-Rozenblit, 2009); the impact of student diversity (Kennedy, Dalgarno, Bennett, Gray, Judd, Waycott, Chang, Bishop, Maton & Krause, 2009); a growing part time, mature age student cohort (Jones, Ramanau, Cross & Healing, 2010) who are working and upskilling, and the expansion and globalisation of higher education generally (Harmon, 2005).

Definitions of distance education have become blurred in recent times with the widespread adoption of ICT to support a range of teaching and learning activities including distance education. As discussed by Guri-Rozenblit (2009), several terms, including online learning, eLearning, virtual learning and distance learning are used synonymously, further blurring understandings of distance education. For the purposes of this paper, distance learning is defined as all learning that takes place where there is no face to face interaction between students and between students and

teachers. Any interaction between learners and between learners and teachers is mediated by technology (Keegan, 2008). However, this broad definition of distance learning, along with the interchange of terms, overlooks the particular circumstances of the distance learner. For the purposes of this paper, distance learners are defined as those learners who participate in 80% or more of their courses and programs off campus, thus having little opportunity for formal and informal face to face learning opportunities with peers and teachers (Allen & Seaman, 2008, 2010).

This paper describes aspects of a qualitative study to explore distance learners' experiences of where and how they learn, often captured under the term 'learning spaces', learners' mobility and their use of ICT for learning. The focus here is on the overarching themes that emerged from the study and how the role of the student voice can enhance the distance learner experience. More discussion of other aspects of the study including learning spaces and mobile learning are reported elsewhere. The paper concludes with some considerations for key stakeholders.

## Literature

As the ownership and use of personal technology has become increasingly ubiquitous, the adoption of ICT by higher education has continued to grow rapidly, with all Australian institutions integrating technology into the learning experience. This occurs primarily through the use of learning management systems (LMS) such as *Blackboard*, *Moodle*, and other more home grown varieties (Smithers, 2009) and tools such as web-based lectures or podcasts (Gosper, Green, McNeill, Phillips, Preston & Woo, 2008; Woo, Gosper, McNeill, Preston, Green & Phillips, 2008; Preston, Phillips, Gosper, McNeill, Woo & Green, 2010). As an outcome of these changes, distance learners have moved with the technology. They have had to manage a shift from print based correspondence packages alongside technologies such as CD-ROMs to web-based learning environments. For many, the situation has become reasonably challenging as the traditional distance education model transforms with the affordances provided by the use of ICT (Szűcs, Tait, Vidal & Bernath, 2009; Taylor, 1995). A consequence of this shift has been that in many cases the focus on supporting the distance learner which characterised earlier models of distance education has been lost (Guri-Rozenblit, 2009). This focus, which supported distance students academically, personally, socially and technically was recognised as critical to their success. The current situation is potentially problematic for distance learners, as the use of technology has become a key component of distance learners' experience, because it could bypass support structures (Forsyth, Pizzica, Laxton, & Mahony, 2010).

The introduction of technology has promised increased and enhanced communication and interaction for distance and online learners (Bates, 2005). Regardless of the opportunities, there is limited evidence to support that this in fact occurs in practice. Indeed, some recent studies (Lonn & Teasley, 2009; McKeogh & Fox, 2009) suggest that most lecturers make little use of the interactive features of many ICT tools. There is also some evidence that although some tools such as lecture recordings are widely utilised, the majority of lecturers make no changes to their curriculum practices to integrate these technologies (Gosper et al., 2008; Preston et al, 2010). Indeed, Conole (2007, 2008) suggests that there is a gap between rhetoric and policy in relation to the use of ICT for teaching and learning.

Distance students are recognised for their busy lives (Kirkwood, 2000) and their preference for anywhere, anytime learning (Anderson & Elloumi, 2008), and much is

also made of students' ownership and use of mobile technology and its potential to create and support mobile learning through active and engaged learning activities and making more effective use of situated and contextual learning environments (Ally, 2009). Nevertheless, to date the majority of higher education institutions in Australia appear to have largely ignored this opportunity to encourage and support mobile learning on an institutional scale (ACODE, 2011). Adding to the opportunities for learners to experience learning with a range of technologies, the adoption of social networking tools such as *Facebook*, *Twitter* and SMS also continues to grow apace. Despite the opportunities offered by such tools, current research indicates that much of the focus of students' use of tools such as *Facebook* is social (Madge, Meek, Wellens & Hooley 2009; Selwyn, 2007). As with much of the work into the student experience with ICT for teaching and learning (Conole, 2008; Fitzgerald & Steele, 2008; Jefferies, 2009; Kennedy et al., 2009) the focus of these studies is upon first year, on campus students.

Consequently, little is understood about the perceptions of distance learners in relation to their learning experience with ICT. What is evident is that distance learners experience a high level of attrition in some online courses, up to 40% in many cases (Patterson & McFadden, 2009). This gives cause for concern about the nature of their learning experience, and impetus to develop a better understanding of the impact of ICT on distance learners.

The notion of 'digital natives' put forward by Prensky (2001) dominates much of the ongoing discussion around the students' learning experience (Jones et al., 2010). Prensky proposed that the 'net gen' students (those born between 1980 and 1995) and now entering university are computer savvy 'digital natives' with high levels of digital competency and high levels of expectation relating to the use of technology for teaching and learning activities. Other authors support this notion (Oblinger & Oblinger, 2005). These papers are highly influential but few are based on empirical research (Jones et al., 2010). The mistaken assumption in much of this work is that first year students are homogeneous groups and thus little attention may be given to the needs of mature age students within these cohorts. Recent studies investigating student experiences with ICT for both personal and learning purposes (Conole, 2008; Fitzgerald & Steele, 2008; Kennedy et al. 2009; Wood & Dodd, 2010) provide evidence to refute this notion of homogeneity, however the focus of these latter studies is still largely upon on campus first year students, with little understanding of the experience of distance learners.

### **Investigating the student experience**

With the rapid adoption of ICT for teaching and learning as outlined above, there has been considerable interest in exploring the impact of technology on student learning. Consequently practitioners and researchers have investigated and disseminated their work across numerous journals and conferences which have a focus on the use of ICT in education. However, the majority of these studies into ICT use in higher education were "written from the perspective of the practitioner and are under the control of institutions or teachers" (Mayes, 2006, p.3).

Consequently, while these studies provide useful information, this approach to understanding the use of ICT for teaching and learning:

... largely neglects a genuinely learner-centred perspective: that students experience formal learning in emotional terms, that their motivation to learn is only understandable by looking at their lives holistically, and that technology is embedded in their social experience. (Mayes, 2006, p.3)

It appears, then, that while much of the dissemination around the use of ICTs for teaching and learning is interesting, there is a tendency to the evaluation of 'war stories' of practice, that are from the 'teachers perspective' and few have developed methodologies for incorporating the student voice to inform and enhance the learning experience of specific cohorts of students. Further to this, while there has been considerable activity around including the student voice in quality processes and activities (Little & Williams, 2010), as Porter (2008) points out, much of this activity relates to structures and there is a need to consider how institutions can focus on the students and their individual perspectives, as well as their wider contributions.

JISC (2009) point out different cohorts of learners experience learning differently. For example, on campus students have different requirements to mature age working professionals who study primarily at a distance. However, many of the support systems in place in institutions tend to relate to the on campus learner rather than those students who might study through different modalities (Forsyth et al, 2010), and do not address the specific needs of the distance or online learner. Additionally, Jara & Mellor (2010) found that where data is collected from distance learners it is not always acted upon, even in institutions where online distance learning is a key focus of institutional activities. This would come as no surprise to many as institutional data collected across the higher education sector is quite widely known to be poorly used.

The comparative analysis showed that the main issues missing from the quality assurance documentation that were mentioned by the interviewees were those related to student participation and the support provided to the students... This failure was due to either the inappropriateness of the quality assurance procedures or the inadequate recording of their implementation (Jara & Mellor, 2010, p. 711.)

## **Methodology**

Given the paucity of specific information available about the distance learner in general, a gap has been identified which requires addressing, to enable institutions to assist their students to progress in their studies in a satisfactory manner. Understanding and acting on improving the student learning experience can assist institutions and students to counter challenges that they might face in their studies. The student voice can also be used to inform how institutions and their staff can plan for successful learner experiences including drawing upon appropriate pedagogies that account for the diversity of students and their needs. To date there appears to be limitations in how these pedagogies respond directly to the distance learner.

This qualitative study took a phenomenological approach to investigating the student voice as this was deemed as being the most appropriate way in which to answer the research question, "What are the experiences of distance learners' use of ICTs for teaching and learning?" The research question is framed from the perspective of the 'lived experience' of the distance learners and therefore consistent with the methodological approach. The aim of using the phenomenological approach for this study as opposed to other qualitative approaches was to:

... describe as accurately as possible the phenomenon, refraining from any pre-given framework, but remaining true to the facts (Groenworld, 2004, p.5).

## Participants

Students were purposively selected to provide a participant cohort that reflected a range of distance learning experiences. This included choosing participants on the basis of information rich cases (Mayes, 2006). Once ethical approval was approved, a letter outlining the types of learning experiences that were preferred, was sent out to prospective participants via the student services *InsiderGuide* blog page. The participants sought were:

- International students studying by distance
- Students living on campus and studying by distance
- Postgraduate students working full time
- Undergraduate students working full time
- Students who may be combining on campus and distance courses

The final group of 12 participants represented a wide diversity of distance students' learning experiences. However, no international students or students living on campus and studying by distance came forward.

## Methods

In keeping with the phenomenological approach, student-centred approaches to research allow for the collection of thick descriptions and capture the students' feelings in relation to their activities as well as information about these experiences (Mayes 2006). The methods for this study included:

- A literature review (literature was considered data in this study)
- The day experience method (DEM) (Learning Landscape Project Team, 2008)
- *Charting the Week's Activities* (CWA - drawing upon the day reconstruction method)
- Photos of learning spaces
- Focus groups

As in other phenomenological studies (e.g. Ganeson & Ehrich, 2010) diaries are a key method of data collection. For this study two approaches to using diaries were utilised, the DEM and the CWA. Students were encouraged to provide a digital diary using either video or audio (Jefferies, 2009) but were also given the choice of using print if they preferred, as it was thought that this would better capture the ways in which students use technology, rather than requiring a use that may not be part of their normal use of technology.

The day experience method (DEM) was adapted from Riddle & Arnold's (2007) resource kit to meet the needs and requirements of this study. DEM is based on a combination of the *Day Reconstruction Method* (DRM) and the *Experience Sampling Method* (ESM) (Hektner et al, 2007). The DRM is designed to gather information about how people experience various activities and events in their lives (Kahneman et al, 2004). ESM involves "signaling questions at informants repeatedly throughout the sampling periods" (Khan et al, 2009, p. 15). In particular the DEM was used to capture students' learning activities over an 18-hour period. Students were sent SMS messages on their mobile phones at irregular intervals through this period and were asked to

describe their activities, where they were and who they were with, the resources they were using and how they were feeling. Students were asked to provide as much detail as possible.

Unique to this study is the CWA. Devised by the researcher, the CWA was developed to overcome perceived limitations of the DEM in capturing common patterns and routines of study not fully addressed in one 18 hour time slot. Consequently, drawing on the DRM (Hektner et al. 2007), the CWA was developed so that participants could provide a daily summary of their work over a longer time period so as to identify these learning patterns and routines. They were asked to log their learning, personal and social activities, the resources they used for teaching and learning activities and their feelings in relation to these experiences. Riddle & Howell (2008) note that using tools such as the DEM is an:

attempt to reduce recall distortion and the ideological biases of other sampling methods such as interviews, survey and focus groups (p.4).

The CWA and DEM processes were complemented by asking participants to take part in a focus group where they shared their experiences and described how they went about learning with ICTs (Riddle & Howell, 2008).

Data collected from these approaches were analysed using *NVIVO* and an interpretative thematic approach (IPA). The data analysis followed a four step process outlined by Ganeson and Ehrich (2010) and drawing on Giorgi's (1985b, 11-18) process for IPA. To ensure the accuracy of analysis and the consequent interpretation of the data, the completed voice studies were returned to the participants for checking. All 12 participants agreed that the studies accurately reflected their experiences and required none or very minor textual adjustments. In general the students were extremely happy with the studies (student names are pseudonyms):

WOW, wow, wow....

Thank you for doing such great justice to my 'voice' both my positive experiences and comments and the negative experiences and comments. (Ingrid, email comment, 23 Feb 2011).

## Results and discussion

Data generated a number of common themes across the 12 voice studies during the analysis stage. In this paper, and given space, the five themes are discussed. They include individualness, connectedness, quality, mobility and resourcefulness.

### Individualness

For each of the learners in this project, the ways in which they organised their learning spaces and used ICT technology to support independent learning varied widely depending on their different needs and requirements (Kirkwood, 2000). Each situation is highly individual, as distance learners fit their learning in around their other interests and commitments, impacting on the choices these learners make about the use of ICT for teaching and learning and the spaces they choose to learn in, creating particular challenges in how institutions can effectively support this great diversity of distance learners' needs (Anderson & Elloumi, 2008). This individuality has particular implications for:

- learning design,
- personal learning environments, and
- quality processes (specifically the ways in which student feedback is collected, managed and responded to).

For some students, it can feel as though the institution is not listening and responding to the feedback they provide and there is little recognition of individual needs. As Ingrid pointed out:

It doesn't always feel that our feedback is valued and actually considered and you know, the individualness of our various voices, it doesn't always feel that that's being taken into account (Ingrid, Focus group discussion, November, 2010).

For the participants in this study, the opportunity to have their voice heard was a strong motivating factor for agreeing to be part of the study. This suggests that some students would like to provide input into their teaching and learning activities in ways that are not currently available to them.

### **Connectedness**

Connectedness in this study refers to students' ability to interact with each other, their lecturers and the institution. Connectedness was a strong theme across the student voices in this study, although the nature of how different students like or would like to experience connectedness varied considerably between participants (Anderson & Elloumi, 2008). Students made use of both institutional and non-institutional technologies to support connectedness. It is important to note here that where students used non-institutional social networking tools to support their learning activities, they quite often set up separate social networking sites apart from their personal sites for this purpose.

While some students still make little use of informal learning communities and networks, for half the students in this study the ability to participate in informal learning communities or networks was highly valued (Anderson & Elloumi, 2008). Additionally, two students expressed an interest in participating in informal networks but were unsuccessful in establishing such networks, with no support from the institution in this regard. For one student, the preference for independent learning was more about expediency, where completing the course as quickly as possible was a higher priority than interaction with other students.

Also of interest was the reporting by three of the participants in this study that podcasting played an important role in their feeling of connectedness to the institution.

#### *Connectedness and social networking sites*

For the students in this study the institutional page serves a valuable support role. For all of the participants, being able to connect to the institution through the use of the ED UNE (student support services *Facebook* site) served a very useful purpose in keeping them up to date with administrative and technical aspects of their courses and programs. Additionally, some students also liked the ability provided by this 'official' *Facebook* site to get to know other students in their courses so that they could form informal learning communities. This ability to connect to other students is very important to some students. While residential schools are a key tool for students to get to know each other, not all students have the opportunity to participate in these



activities. Further to this, as some courses and programs do not include residential schools and the ongoing inclusion of residential schools as part of distance learning offering is not necessarily guaranteed, institutional use of social networking tools such as *Facebook* can play a critical role in enabling students to link up with other like-minded people to create informal learning support groups.

This study provides some evidence that student-initiated social networking sites such as *Facebook*, *MSN* and *Twitter* provide opportunities to meet a complex range of social, academic and administrative needs, depending on individual preferences. This is similar to findings by Conole (2008) who found that students use a wide variety of social networking tools to interact with their peers. Nevertheless, this study also indicates that where the use of technology is well designed and the learning activities engaging and providing perceived value, these students appear to be very satisfied with their learning experience.

As a student studying for an undergraduate degree via the Internet, I did not feel that I missed out on social interaction due to the discussion forums, wikis, chat rooms as well as the few residential schools that I attended. I feel that I actually got to know some of the lecturers a lot better than if I sat in on their lectures in person. (Dorothy, notes, October, 2010).

This is supported by Allen (2010), who suggests that engagement is the key to involving students.

For the participants in this study, non-compulsory informal student networks appear to be the most successful in terms of ongoing student participation in and benefit from participation in such groups. It may be that the ability to drop in and out of such tools at times that suit the learners might be more attractive to distance education students than tools such as *Skype* which require a more formal organisation. Or, it may be that different technologies support different learner needs for different circumstances.

### Quality

In this study, while students were satisfied overall with the general quality of their courses, they identified a number of factors impacting on the quality of the distance learner's experience with ICT for teaching and learning. These factors include the provision of learning materials; learning design; online interactions; integration of technology into teaching and learning; reliability of technology used for teaching and learning; and staff and student capacity in relation to the use of ICT for teaching and learning. The quality of courses in relation to these factors varied widely across programs, highlighting issues regarding the ways in which quality processes are developed and implemented for technology mediated distance learning (Jara & Mellar, 2010). From this experience it can be deduced that quality processes are indeed not necessarily applied to the technologically supported aspects of learning, as suggested by other researchers (Guri-Rozenblit, 2009; Jara & Mellar, 2010).

Guri-Rozenblit (2009) expressed concerns that the careful quality processes applied to traditional distance learning materials are not necessarily applied to ICT based distance learning. Students in this study identified that consistency of presentation and accuracy of information of online content can sometimes be a problem, confirming Guri-Rozenblit's (2009) concerns.

Some students, while valuing the inclusion of podcasts in their courses and programs, found that in some cases these recordings overlooked the inclusion of distance learners as participants in these activities. This supports the contention that the majority of lecturers make little or no changes to their curriculum or teaching practice to include these technologies (Gosper et al., 2008; Preston et al, 2010).

Issues of quality also extend to online interactions:

The other thing that affects the quality of the technology and the technology learning experiences and the distance education for distance ed students is actually the enthusiasm of the lecturers to participate through the ICT that's available to them. Some lecturers and unit coordinators are enthusiastic in terms of working with students using ICT, online chat rooms, email, voice call, that sort of stuff. Some lecturers seem much more reticent to interact with students in that online forum. Some lecturers have a very relaxed and open feel to their discussion boards in their units. Some lecturers heavily regiment the discussions in their discussion boards (Ingrid, CWA, October, 2010).

This comment highlights the concerns raised by Hughes (2009), amongst others, in relation to the digital divide that is becoming evident between students and teachers with respect to expectations students have about how technology might be used for teaching and learning, and the reality of how lecturers are using it.

The challenge of appropriate staff development for teaching and learning is a contentious one and one for which there is no easy answer in an higher education environment that still has a strong emphasis on research outputs. How universities respond to this could be critical to their ongoing role in providing education to students as more alternatives to participate in learning continue to emerge. As long as institutions lack the will to engage with and address these issues, as Ehlers & Schreckenber (2010) currently suggest is the case, this will continue to be an issue. As Conole (2007, 2008) points out, more needs to be done to address the gap between rhetoric and practice.

As well as being an issue for staff, digital literacy can also be an issue for learners. While applications vary widely between courses and programs, the use of technology for teaching and learning is common for distance learners. However, as in other studies, the level of ICT competency varies widely across cohorts (Fitzgerald & Steele, 2008; Kennedy et al, 2009; Wood & Dodd, 2010), as well as amongst the co-learners who form part of the smaller learning communities these students participate in. This can have a negative impact on learners' experiences in online forums, particularly where they feel that other learners are not adding value to the activities.

### **Mobility and mobile learning**

For the majority of learners in this study, learning is integrated into work, social and family aspects of their lives and consequently mobility and mobile learning is a key aspect of their learning experience. Mobility here refers both to the ways learners interact with learning activities and the technologies they use to support their learning, as well as their physical mobility supported by the use of mobile technologies (El-Hussein & Cronje, 2010). Mobile materials, technologies and learning design are all vital aspects of this mobility. To support this mobility, several of the students made a deliberate decision to purchase mobile technologies to support their mobile learning

and to enable continuity of learning (Kulkulska-Hulme, 2009), as they went about other activities. This has particular implications for the design of learning for these learners.

Much is made of the opportunities of mobile learning for 'anywhere, anytime' learning (Traxler, 2009, 2011; Ramaprasad, 2009) and students are actively seeking to use their mobile technologies to support their learning (van Der Werf & Sabtier, 2009). However, in this instance, little attention has been paid to supporting mobility through integrating mobile learning into online learning materials and activities in any of the programs students participating in the study are enrolled in. This finding is reflected more broadly in the Australian context in the results of a recent survey which indicated that mobile learning activities at this stage remain fairly limited in the majority of institutions (ACODE, 2011). While the lack of support for mobile learning appears to be becoming an issue for some learners, there can also be problems with the ways in which the learning activities are integrated into a course. In some cases, participants reported that the learning design can limit students' mobility making it difficult to use materials in flexible ways.

While some tools such as podcasts are well suited to mobile learning and are considered to provide pedagogical benefits (Woo et al., 2009), in the context of this study, they are often inconsistently available for students, creating frustration and disappointment through their lack of availability.

As well as considering the development and implementation of policy around technology use to support distance learners' desire to be more mobile learners, consideration also should be given to redesigning learning activities and materials to better suit mobile learning environments and platforms. While there is considerable activity at a course level in relation to mobile learning, and some institutions are beginning to offer mobile access to LMS such as *Blackboard*, the recent ACODE (2011) survey showed few indications that institutions are recognising or responding to a society that is generally becoming more mobile (Traxler, 2010, 2011), and to the implications this has for teaching and learning.

Drawing on the results of this study, there are indications that enabling distance students' mobility through the design and integration of mobile learning could be considered an important consideration in providing a positive learning experience for distance learners, and one that is consistent with general perception that students want more flexible anywhere, anytime learning (Ally, 2009; Williams, 2011).

### **Resourcefulness**

For the participants in this study, being distance learners was generally a choice they had made to either support their learning while they managed health issues, enable them to juggle work, family and busy lives, or enable them to study while they contributed to their communities as a major part of their regular activities. While the participants were generally happy with their choice, they demonstrated remarkable resourcefulness in overcoming challenges and finding ways to achieve satisfactory learning outcomes. For example:

Log into *Facebook* and *Skype* to see what others are doing – we have a quiz for one of the units that we decide that we'll try and do together this afternoon .... (Christine, CWA data, Wednesday 27 October, 7.00 pm).

Additionally, although all the participants found the technical support provided to be of a high standard, they were adept at 'trouble shooting' when help was not available, or seeking help from family members and friends to overcome technical issues. Students are also resourceful in utilising available technology to solve what they consider are limitations in their learning experience. As Ingrid (Ingrid, CWA, 28 October 2010) pointed out:

I've had one unit where a whole bunch of us actually moved the entire unit's discussion onto *Facebook* because the bulletin board was so heavily moderated.

## Conclusions

This study has sought to recognise the importance of the student voice, having identified the area as a priority need for empirical investigation. The results of this study have generated a range of possibly useful outcomes for stakeholders who include senior managers within Universities, Government analysts who write policy around quality assurance, educational designers, academics more generally and students themselves. The five themes - individualness, connectedness, quality, mobility, and resourcefulness - can be extrapolated for specific consideration by these stakeholders.

Educational designers, for example, should take note of how Web 2.0 tools are being utilised by learners and give consideration to ways in which connectedness through both formal and informal avenues can be more effectively fostered for distance learners. Consideration also needs to be given to appropriate and effective capacity building for online learning for both staff and students. As pointed out previously (Anderson & Elloumi, 2008; Bates, 2005), while there is much hype around engagement and interaction with these tools, with the notable exception of two programs the participants in this study largely do not experience these types of activities in a consistent manner across their courses.

For senior administrators, quality processes and 'closing the loop' on feedback has emerged as significant for the total learning experience and for meeting individual student needs. While in this research students were active in providing their feedback to the institution they did not necessarily feel that the feedback was then acknowledged or acted upon. The participants felt that feedback mechanisms did not address their individual needs.

It doesn't always feel that our feedback is valued and actually considered and you know the individualness of our various voices it doesn't always feel that that's being taken into account (Ingrid, focus group discussion, November, 2010).

This sentiment echoes Porter's (2008) view that many of the processes that collect the student voices overlook the individualness of students' voices and experiences as well as Jara and Mellor's (2010) findings that where data on distance learners' experiences is collected, institutions often failed to act on this information. Additionally, the need to consider how institutions can appropriately acknowledge and respond to the individualness of online learners is a further consideration of administrators. These are but three significant examples of the impact this work can have.

This study also represents the start of a new approach to address the gap in knowledge about distance learners and ICT and it is hoped it will provide new methods for others

to incorporate into their own development of learning experiences for their students. The approach, particularly the researcher's innovation in *Charting the Week's Activities* (CWA) aimed to gather information that goes beyond generalisations about homogenous cohorts and rather provide an approach that others may find useful to gathering data to inform the distance learner experience in localised and globalised contexts.

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