Learning Support for Distance Learners: Towards the Future

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Abstract

Following the merger of Bay of Plenty Polytechnic and Waiariki Institute of Technology to become Toi Ohomai Te Pūkenga, the newly formed Te Ranga Eke Panuku / Learning Success and Engagement (LSE) team combined and redeveloped their services. In this article the author reflects on her ATLAANZ 2022 conference presentation, which shared distance students' perspectives from her master's research on the revised services. The author's study explored whether and how the LSE services were meeting student needs and how the services could be further improved. Analysis of the survey (n=278) and interview (n=12) data revealed gaps in awareness of support services across all learner groups. However, distance students were less connected to the support services than on-campus learners, and the researcher found unmet academic and pastoral needs among distance participants. In addition, participants stated that they had been looking for ways to express their opinions and saw the research survey as an opportunity to 'have their say' to make improvements. As per the Pastoral Education (Pastoral Care of Tertiary and International Learners) Code of Practice 2021, the LSE team has increased promotion of services for distance learners, and developed more resources. A booking system now gives ākonga agency in accessing the services, and tutors can similarly book in-class support. The research illustrates that all Te Pūkenga students, whether distance, campus-based, or work-based, require access to online services during flexible hours. Further, every distance and work-based learner, should be able to access face-to-face support at their nearest campus, alongside their campus-based peers, within and beyond regular hours.

Keywords: Te Pūkenga, learner voice, academic support, online learning, online learning support, face-to-face learning support

Kia ora, ko Ruth Thomas ahau. I am a Learning Facilitator/Taura Ako (Tertiary Learning Advisor) at the Mokoia campus of Toi Ohomai Te Pūkenga (Toi Ohomai) in Rotorua. At the ATLAANZ 2022 conference I shared a key finding from my master's research, relating to services for distance learners. The study explored learners' experiences and perceptions of Toi Ohomai learning support services, following the merger of Bay of Plenty Polytechnic and Waiariki Institute of Technology to form Toi Ohomai in 2016. Post merge, the pre-existing learning support teams combined to become Te Ranga Eke Panuku, the Learning Support and Engagement (LSE) team. Together we redeveloped Toi Ohomai's learning support services and resources. Learning advisors on the main campuses in Rotorua and Tauranga were renamed 'Learning Facilitators' and pastoral support team members became known as 'Engagement Facilitators'. Regional learning advisors at our campuses in Taupō, Tokoroa and Whakatāne, who provide both academic and personal support, became 'Regional Engagement Facilitators'.

The mixed methods research project aimed to discover learners' preferred forms of support, whether and how they were using the redeveloped services and what the LSE team could do to improve our services and their reach. During the research period, distance learners comprised 20% of all Toi Ohomai students. The research produced a large volume of material; applicable findings were shared with Toi Ohomai stakeholders (e.g., Kaiako Success Advisors, Facilities, the library team, Student Administration Services and Marketing). A key finding relevant to the learning support team was the gap in distance learners reaching learning support services. Based on this, the LSE team has made a concerted effort to facilitate better access to the services for distance learners. These improvements also assist campus-based learners when they are studying off campus.

The onset of COVID-19 during the research period led to further adaptations to services to better meet learners' holistic needs at this time. All Ratonga Ākonga / Student Support teams added to and/or refined their services. Services were adjusted, e.g., counselling through Te Whare Hauora/Health, library information searching and/or referencing support, Careers and Employability job-related assistance, and pastoral and/or IT skills/academic support from the LSE team. However, in my experience, the most common reason for distance learners to seek support is to obtain help with assessment-related skills and information technologies.

Background

Today's Tertiary Learners

The tertiary student population in Aotearoa New Zealand is now far more diverse than in the past. For example, we see more Māori and Pacific learners, mature students and disabled learners, along with young learners and international students. The complex social realities that structure learners' lives, and their hugely varied lived experience (García, 2021) should inform the understanding and actions of staff charged with supporting them to succeed.

Distance Learners

Distance learning in higher education continues to expand, as a popular, practical and sustainable way to study; COVID-19 illustrated the sustainability of online learning and increased uptake (Zhao et al., 2022). Olugbara et al. (2023) note the significant challenges of online study, which lead to poor course success and high rates of withdrawal or non-completion. Distance students may feel "physically isolated" (Motteram & Forrester, 2005, p. 286) and learning may seem impersonal due to reduced access to non-verbal aspects of communication (Appana, 2008). Most learners need help from staff and peers to complete their distance courses successfully (Dede, n.d., as cited in Waldrop et al., 2013). Moreover, students at greater risk in traditional courses are even more so in online learning (Jones et al., 2009).

Toi Ohomai is a business division of Te Pūkenga, formed to improve vocational education and to address inequitable outcomes for underserved learners, as set out in the NZIST Charter (Schedule 22 of the Education and Training Act 2020). In 2019 and 2020, Toi Ohomai campus-based Māori and Pacific learners' course completion rates were 10-15% lower than their non-Māori and non-Pacific peers; distance Māori and Pacific learner success figures were 20-30% lower than those of non-Māori and non-Pacific distance students. Non-Māori and non-Pacific learners' course success rates were around 86% regardless of whether they were studying on a campus or online (Thomas, 2022). There is a high personal, financial and organisational cost when students do not complete their studies (Ammunson, 2018; Brown et al., 2013). All possible steps should be taken to assist learners to succeed, no matter the delivery mode of their course.

Holistic Learning Support for Distance Learners

The Tertiary Education Commission (TEC) sets out the elements needed for student success. Their Ōritetanga Learner Success Framework focuses on producing a "system-level shift in performance" to address long-standing educational inequities in Aotearoa (Tertiary Education Commission, 2020, p. 1). Key to this is holistic student support: "critical academic and personal supports" integrated into a "seamless, timely, and personal experience for every student" (Tertiary Education Commission, 2020, p. 2). Responsive learning support services are essential to a satisfactory, effective learning experience for distance students (Mohammadimehr et al., 2022), especially early in the study trajectory when dropout rates are much higher (De Paepe et al., 2016). These findings align with the views of the Toi Ohomai distance ākonga shared during the research (Thomas, 2022). Both academic and non-academic support are important for distance learners' success (Olugbara et al., 2023). Non-academic support helps distance students build confidence for online interaction with peers and tutors and may be even more important to their success than academic support (Baxter, 2012). A sense of connection and belonging was shown to be an important element in student wellbeing and success in the Toi Ohomai study (Thomas, 2022).

Learner Voice – Fostering Agency

The key research aim – to understand how the adapted and new services were working for students, and how to improve them – was explained in communications promoting the research. Almost one in four of the 278 survey respondents volunteered for an interview. Participants indicated that they actively wanted to have their say. Many stated that they wished to help Toi Ohomai to improve services for future ākonga. One distance student interviewee stated that they were "happy that we're talking because at least I have somewhere to say… how I feel… because otherwise it would never be sorted out. That's the reason I put my name in… to make it better for Toi Ohomai." The successful implementation of the Pastoral Education (Pastoral Care of Tertiary and International Learners) Code of Practice 2021 (Ministry of Education, 2021) will be important in ensuring that ākonga have ready access to mechanisms to express their opinions, and that they are strengthened to do so. The study found that participants and their peers engaged in a range of agentic behaviours to access support or to develop their own options through informal peer-learning / tuakana-teina support networks. When developing online programmes and supports, tertiary education

providers must engage in dialogue with their learners, to be effective and inclusive in meeting learner need (Miles et al., 2018).

Learning Support Services for Toi Ohomai Distance Learners

Promotion of Services

The research data analysis showed there were gaps in awareness of support services among all learner groups, however online students were shown to be the least connected to these services. For instance, when ākonga in fully online courses were asked in the survey about their use of the various forms of online learning support, they usually stated 'online student' or 'distance course'. This seemed to indicate an assumption that learning support options were not available to them. One wrote: "Online student – was it an option?" When answering the survey question about how learning support services could be improved, one distance learner wrote "Help with online study." This reflects the perception that distance learners appeared to have that there were no support services for them as online ākonga. It could also relate to trying but not being able to reach the support services, as shared by P8 and P9 in their interviews. In their open-ended comments on services, some distance learners advocated for more promotion of the services, for example: "Day One of course they should introduce themselves and tell online students what they do. It would be very helpful for the students." Another suggested: "Advertise more to online students."

Face-to-Face and 'Face-to-Face-Like' Engagement

The most frequently used Learning Facilitator service, according to the survey data analysis, was the face-to-face individual appointment. The overall preference for face-to-face engagement is illustrated by this comment: "Love face-to-face contact." When describing their ideal learning support in the survey, both campus-based and online learners indicated a preference for face-to-face forms of support; for example, "I find the face-to-face services extremely useful and have used the service numerous times. I prefer face-to-face over online meetings. I find it more personal and get more out of a session." Face-to-face support was particularly important to P12, an international learner away from the support of family: "It's not just the language, it's about the human connectivities." It is important to build a sense of belonging and connection (Baxter, 2012; Brown et al., 2013). Offering a range of appropriate,

well-developed online learning support services can do this (Mohammadimehr et al., 2022; Sánchez-Elvira Paniagua & Simpson, 2018).

One distance learner's suggestion for improvement showed they had not found online help, but reflected their view on what it should entail: "Available online face-to-face talk." The use of the phrase "face-to-face" points to the importance of learning advisors emulating as many elements of face-to-face interaction as possible, to be engaging when we are online. At its best, this means we take the time to build a relationship of trust through whakawhanaungatanga (relationship-building) before working with the learner to address their specific learning-related query. Online, appointments are usually individual, but the same processes can be used with groups: 'cameras on' with intermittent eye contact (by glancing at the camera) except where bandwidth is insufficient; and 'getting to know you' time prior to addressing the specific study-related need.

Timely Access to Services and After-Hours Support

Distance learners who were interviewed provided in-depth data on their experiences of support during the research period. P8 had been enrolled when they completed the research survey but was unable to reach the support services in time to help them meet assessment requirements:

> After my first assessment I couldn't really understand what was going on so I thought, okay, I think I need to go to the student support, and see what they can help me with… So, I went to my tutor, and my tutor said, go to these people. So, I inquired with Toi Ohomai, the person I was given the name, and then she referred me to somebody else. I think I had to go through three different people, before I finally was put through to Studiosity, and by that time the assessment was due so I said, "Well, I, you know I can't use them now".

P8 decided to withdraw to relieve their stress and commented that they could not succeed due to their low grades in the first assessments: "My grades were not as, you know like what I wanted, because my mind was really not clear." They also were not sure whether Studiosity could be trusted: "I thought it has to be somebody within Toi Ohomai, not somebody from outside but somebody within… I wasn't really keen on giving them what I had." Overall, this distance learner was highly stressed: "I just had to bow out… Even my husband could feel… how it is going, you know, sleepless nights and everything." Timely

access to the services could have prevented this withdrawal. Pathways have now been provided as later described, and during LSE introductions, facilitators explain Studiosity's (2021) services and how to access them.

Several survey respondents advocated for the provision of learning advisor services after hours and at weekends, as work and/or family commitments prevented them using the services during regular hours. Fitting study in around other commitments is known to be a significant challenge (e.g., Appana, 2008; Olugbara et al., 2023; Stevenson, 2013).

Pastoral Care for Distance Learners

Interviewee P9 was also studying by distance. They felt extremely pressured by finances and family expectations. Their learning challenges (Motteram & Forrester, 2005; Olugbara et al., 2023) and sense of isolation (Appana, 2008) were apparent. They had received a study scholarship which needed to be repaid if the programme was not completed. They did not know how to access support:

> I was alone, no help, I was just sitting and crying and waiting for help, but nothing… So why can't I call the quality [LSE] team, and ask them to help me understand. I had to re-enrol in this course because no support was provided.

They recommended that Toi Ohomai call distance learners once a month to check in, as per the practice of their previous NZ tertiary education provider. The need to keep in touch with distance learners and to be aware of their situations was highlighted by Zhao et al. (2022). Efforts to engage with distance learners should commence early in the course when students are more likely to drop out (De Paepe et al., 2016). After the interview, P9 was connected with support and has now gone on to graduate from their course.

Increased Engagement with Online Support

In the context of the increased uptake of online learning, for the convenience and accessibility it offers (Zawacki-Richter & Naidu, 2016), it was no surprise that a number of research participants confirmed they had become more willing to use online services. This appeared to be associated with COVID-19 lockdowns, as established by Zhao et al. (2022). One respondent remarked: "Online facilitation is the safe and convenient way to achieve every type of academic support now-a-days." Another wrote: "Post-lockdown, I have got

more used to using online services." In addition, one ākonga noted: "It has saved time and petrol to not have to physically come to campus." Another commented that online support is "easy to access". Online support services are an important part of the suite of ākonga support services. This support should be holistic to meet the range of needs of individual learners and to support quality online learning experiences and success, according to the promise offered by online learning of an "education for all" (Zawacki-Richter & Naidu, 2016, p. 264).

Toi Ohomai eCampus NZ Learners

After finalising the research report, I became aware that at least a quarter of the 20% of Toi Ohomai learners in our fully online courses were eCampus NZ students. Specifically, in 2019, 26% (116.3 EFTS) and in 2020, 29% (161.5 EFTS) of our distance learners were enrolled with Toi Ohomai but studying with eCampus NZ (Toi Ohomai Institute of Technology, 2021), due to their physical location. I had not realised that these learners were included in our '20%' distance student group so I did not recruit any of them to the study.

To understand more about how the needs of Toi Ohomai eCampus NZ ākonga were being met and how their success might relate to the LSE team's mahi, I spoke with Brenda Shanks, Student Advisor Team Lead at eCampus NZ (personal communication, October 20, 2022). Brenda outlined the services provided for eCampus NZ learners by course facilitators and by her team. She explained that whenever the designated support services did not meet the holistic needs of the learner, they were referred for on-campus support with their enrolling ITP (the ITP being assigned by geographic location). Brenda commented that, while eCampus NZ students were made aware of the opportunity to access face-to-face on-campus services with their enrolling ITP, they might not always take advantage of this. Challenges in doing so could include a lack of funds for travel, not feeling confident, and caring responsibilities (B. Shanks, personal communication, October 20, 2022). When I checked with my team, four of us had worked with eCampus NZ ākonga between 2019 and 2023, either at a main or at a regional campus. In total, 11 students had been seen, a very small proportion of the eCampus NZ learners enrolled with Toi Ohomai during that time. On reflection, I should also have researched the experiences and perceptions of these eCampus NZ learners of the services of Te Ranga Eke Panuku. ECampus NZ has now become a business unit of Open Polytechnic (eCampus NZ, 2023).

Overall, the conversation with Brenda indicated that issues faced by eCampus NZ (distance) learners are similar to those of Toi Ohomai distance learners, especially if they are based in a rural location (B. Shanks, personal communication, October 20, 2022). Brenda had observed that one of their partner ITPs offered on-campus drop-in sessions, which had proven helpful to those who were able to attend. As this research and the LSE team's experiences show, the availability of appropriate 'face-to-face like' online support, or actual in-person support where possible, makes a significant difference to learners' success. The eCampus NZ model of ākonga being able to visit the nearest campus for face-to-face support, can potentially be replicated across the motu (all of Aotearoa New Zealand) by Te Pūkenga.

New and Adapted Services and Resources

During the research project, in response to survey suggestions and to address issues raised by distance learner interviewees P8 and P9 in a timely and ethical manner, the LSE team began to develop pathways for improved access to services and resources and acted to increase awareness of the available support. We ramped up promotion among tutors and students. As a result, ākonga studying in a distance course now have a specific "Online Support" section in our Te Ranga Eke Panuku/LSE site via the Student Services Hub tile, as displayed in Figure 1 (Te Ranga Eke Panuku, 2023).
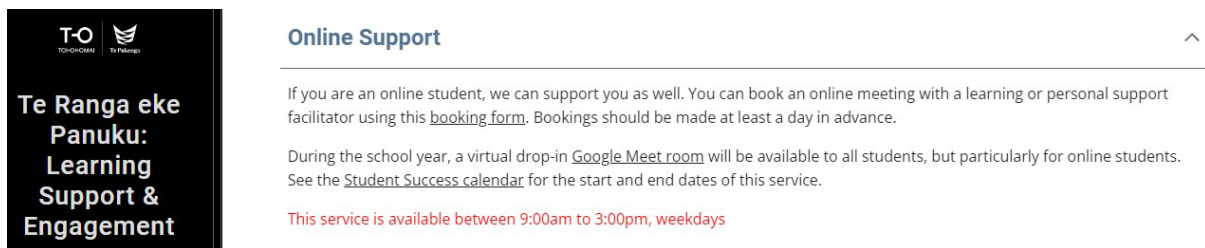

Figure 1. Online support via the Ratonga Ākonga Student Services tile – Toi Ohomai Hub

The messaging captured in Figure 1 makes support options for online ākonga explicit. As can be seen, they are referred to a virtual drop-in as one option. This Google Meet online space is looked after 11 am – 1 pm (reduced from the 9–3 shown here, for staffing reasons) by a Learning Facilitator from either of the main campuses. A Unitec staff member who attended the conference presentation mentioned that their team operates a similar Monday–Friday drop-in which can be attended online or in person. As this and other studies have found (Baxter, 2012; Olugbara et al., 2023; Thomas, 2022), distance or off-campus learners do require pastoral support. To make options clearer, Te Ranga Eke Panuku now use the

phrase 'personal support' alongside the word 'engagement', as the term 'engagement' was not clear to many (Thomas, 2022). Live introductions to LSE services are offered where online courses have a set class or tutorial time, and information is shared on course pages. Recordings of the introductions are available to suit student preferences (Sánchez-Elvira Paniagua & Simpson, 2018; Zhao et al., 2022). Tutors in online courses also refer individual ākonga to Learning Facilitators for support; referrals are an important pathway to support for distance learners (Russo-Gleicher, 2013, as cited in Brown et al., 2013).

The Learning Facilitator ākonga booking form shown in Figure 2 facilitates learner choice. The agentic behaviours reported by research participants when they could not access needed support indicated that ākonga were likely to find it beneficial to independently book appointments. The form was developed by the LSE Engagement Facilitator team lead. Ākonga exercise agency by booking their own Learning Facilitator appointment. After choosing the length and mode/location of the appointment, they can click 'Anyone' or alternatively, can select a particular facilitator, followed by their preferred time and day. From there (not displayed), they enter their student ID, name, contact details, course code, and details of the support required. The two parties each receive an email notification. Ākonga can reschedule or cancel via links in the confirmation email giving them ongoing control over the booking process.

Figure 2. Learning facilitator booking form (Te Ranga Eke Panuku, 2023)

Tutors now have access to a similar form so they can book introduction sessions and in-class workshops. In the introductory sessions, LSE team members explain and promote our services. The tutor booking form makes it easy to arrange workshops, which distance research participants indicated an interest in: "I think online workshops are the best way to communicate with the students and make them understand.". Delivery can be online or face-to-face. Once made, booking details are sent to the selected facilitator.

Sánchez-Elvira Paniagua and Simpson (2018) found that the webinars and video resources offered to tertiary learners as part of the EMPOWER project in Europe, were popular and effective. The project purpose was to "empower students to become life-long,

self-directed learners in open, online and blended-learning environments" (p. 1) to improve retention, success and satisfaction. In the Toi Ohomai research, students indicated that they found video resources particularly useful (Thomas, 2022). These have been provided, with a library of video recordings are now available via the Student Services tile on the Toi Ohomai Hub.

Flexible Learning Support for Ākonga – Recommendations for Te Pūkenga

There is ongoing need for the convenience and practicality of appropriate forms of online learning support for distance learners, and likewise, for campus-based learners. As reported, a number of survey respondents advocated for the provision of learning advisor services after hours and at weekends, due to not being able to use these services during the current scheduled hours. I recommend that after hours online support that any Te Pūkenga ākonga can use be made available along with face-to-face services where feasible, for example at larger campuses. Extended service hours are also likely to be useful for work-based learners. Our team continues to consider options for flexible provision of support. This would include the opportunity for distance learners to visit any Te Pūkenga campus at their convenience to use face-to-face services.

Therefore, if a Te Pūkenga-wide network of flexible, online and on-campus learning support is developed as suggested, then any distance, work-, or campus-based ākonga in any business division can access the support they need to thrive. It appears that such a network is beginning to emerge, as illustrated by a collaboration between NorthTec Te Pūkenga and Open Polytechnic Te Pūkenga, wherein NorthTec provides face-to-face support wānanga sessions for ākonga in Open Polytechnic (online) business courses (NorthTec Te Pūkenga, 2023). This is akin to the eCampus NZ model described earlier. Flexibility of hours will be key to such provision. A network of flexible online and face-to-face services will support all ākonga, whether they are work-based, on-campus, or studying by distance in Aotearoa or offshore.

Conclusion

The merger of two legacy organisations to form Toi Ohomai is a small- scale equivalent of the process that business divisions are undergoing to develop Te Pūkenga. In a

similar way to the research project on students' experiences and perceptions of Toi Ohomai's redeveloped learning support services, we can explore how our evolving Te Pūkenga learner services are meeting the holistic needs of ākonga. This will help us to further develop and improve the network of support throughout the motu for all ākonga, whether they are work-based, on campus or online. Moreover, encouraging and supporting the development of informal peer networks and the agentic learner behaviour observed during this research will help to maximise opportunities for all learners.

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