

# Lights, Camera, Action: Gathering Experiences of First-time Distance Learners

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ascilite Conference

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# Acknowledgment



<http://www.dehub.edu.au>

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## Aussie PM Julia Gillard arrives in NZ

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# Background

Backdrop of significant challenges facing distance education in which issues of attrition (retention) and completion rates have come into sharp relief.



# Background

## Publication of league tables:

- attrition
- completion
- progression

<http://www.tec.govt.nz/>

The screenshot shows the Tertiary Education Commission (TEC) website. The header includes the TEC logo and navigation links: HOME, TERTIARY SECTOR, LEARNERS & ORGANISATIONS (highlighted), FUNDING, RESOURCE CENTRE, and ABOUT US. The breadcrumb trail reads: Home > Learners and organisations > Learners, students, trainees, apprentices > Educational performance in tertiary education > Educational performance at individual tertiary providers.

The main content area is titled "Educational performance at individual tertiary providers". It includes a sub-header "LEARNERS AND ORGANISATIONS" and a list of links: "Learners, students, trainees, apprentices", "Educational performance in tertiary education", "Why this information is useful for you", "Priorities for tertiary education", "Educational performance by type of tertiary provider", "Educational performance at individual tertiary providers" (highlighted), "What the indicators mean", "What does study or training involve?", and "What does it cost?".

The main text explains that the information provides a snapshot of selected performance indicators and is based on tertiary education funded by the Student Achievement Component fund and the Industry Training Fund. It includes a "SELECT AN ORGANISATION AND YEAR" form with dropdown menus for Organisation type (University), Organisation (Massey University), and Year (2009), and a "GET REPORT >>" button.



# Synthesis of the Literature

- Wealth of literature
- Issues around attrition and completion are complex
- Further investigation required of the ‘soft’ factors
- Need to move away from “goulash” approach to support
- There is a growing body of literature on first year experience
- Gap in the literature on the experiences of first-time distance learners
- Dearth of research that presents the learner voice



# Research Aims

To improve the supports and services available for first-time distance learners.



# Research Aims

To improve the supports and services available for first-time distance learners. More specifically...

- To investigate the experiences of being a first time distance learner 'in their own words' from a student perspective
- To develop a set of overarching principles for enhancing distance learner engagement and success;
- To develop a conceptual framework for identifying the most effective use of various intervention tools, supports and resources at early stages of the study lifecycle.



# Research Design

- Design-based research
- Phase 2 - phenomenological approach
- Case studies of first-time distance learners
- 20 participants broadly representing diversity of distance learners
- 140 volunteers from pool of 750 potential participants
- Obtained full human ethics approval process
- Before and after questionnaire
- Weekly video diaries using Sony bloggie™



# Video Diaries

- Adapted from JISC (2006), Arnold & Riddle (2007) and Cashmore, Green & Scott (2010)
- Aim for video diary of  $\geq 5$  m/pw for  $\leq 6$  wks
- Actual video diaries were 2 – 16 m/pw for 7 – 16 wks
- Participant withdrawals: 2 early, 5 in W7, 5 in W14, 8 in W16
- Data collection aided by 'reflective prompt framework'



# Participants



30 – 39 years

Maori

4 papers (units)

College of Humanities

Remote location

Not employed

7 children



# Participants



30 – 39 years

Maori / Pasifika

4 papers (units)

College of Business

Wellington

FT employment

1 guardianship



# Participants



20 – 29 years

European

2 papers (units)

College of Humanities

Urban location

FT employment

0 children



# Participants



30 – 39 years

European

4 papers (units)

College of Humanities

Remote location

Casual employment

2 children



# Participants



50 - 59 years

Maori / European

2 papers (units)

College of Business

Auckland

Seeking employment



# Participants



60+ years

European

1 paper (unit)

College of Education

Remote location

Employed 3 days



# Lessons So Far

1. Stories 'add flesh' to the 'soft factors' of what it means to be a distance learner
2. Distance learning is perceived to enable tertiary study to fit around other life, work and family commitments
3. There is variable digital literacy among first time distance learners
4. Important to make explicit tacit knowledge of what's required to be successful as a distance learner.
5. Supports and services are not always known about or available at point of need.



# Next Steps

1. Complete analysis and report
2. Develop Student Guide to Distance Learning
3. Offer Distance Learner Colloquium

[http://wikiresearcher.org/DEHub\\_Research\\_Projects/DEHubMassey\\_University](http://wikiresearcher.org/DEHub_Research_Projects/DEHubMassey_University)



# Questions



“A prudent **question** is one-half of wisdom.”

Francis Bacon

<http://www.slideshare.net/mbrownz/>

