
Hidden Aspects of Administration: How Scale Changes the Role of a Distance Education Administrator

Sarah J. Stein

University of Otago, New Zealand

sarah.stein@otago.ac.nz

Bill Anderson

University of Otago, New Zealand

bill.anderson@otago.ac.nz

Abstract

Distance education research literature tends to focus on building economies of scale as a way to improve efficiency and effectiveness. However, the smaller scale distance education operation has a place and there are institutions, such as the one where the current study was set, that, while being keen to improve efficiency and effectiveness practices, do not wish to scale up. This paper reports an investigation of the unique small scale distance education context at one university in New Zealand. The purpose was to reflect on the operations from the perspectives of those involved in distance education at the institution. Interviews held with students, lecturers and administrators of distance courses provide insights about how those groups experience distance education and how distance education 'works' in the institution. Analysis of the data revealed that it is the administrators who play a key role in areas of relationship-building, mediation and bridging. The outcomes contribute to the ongoing review and reflection of practices at the institution. In addition, the study adds to the current literature about distance education, because it provides insights into the key, often hidden role of staff providing administrative support that is needed to ensure high quality courses and student experience. In this way, the study provides some much needed evidence about small scale distance education and how it can be organised to contribute to the achievement of institutional and national imperatives, as well as student learning needs.

Introduction

Distance education helps to ensure access to tertiary education at all levels for people in almost any context. It has particular value in enabling access to those who are working and seeking further education that will enable advancement of their career, or support their need or wish to obtain advanced knowledge or maintain currency in their field of expertise (Moore & Kearsley, 2012). Distance education affords this group of people flexibility of access to tertiary education that enables them to study off-site, part-time, fitting study around their hours of employment. This article reports from a research project involving such students, along with the teaching and administrative staff who taught and supported the distance programmes in which those students were involved.

The project was focussed on an investigation of the expectations and perceptions of teaching staff, administrators and students concerning the roles, processes and activities involved in distance education within a single institution. The underlying question was one of the quality of distance education and drew on the notion that addressing the expectations of stakeholders was an important contributor to that quality. However, the question of accounting for the impact of stakeholder expectations is complex. In discussing student expectations and their match (or mismatch) with the realities of higher education, James (2002, p.71) notes that, "the higher education process not only *shapes* student expectations, the education process is itself *influenced* by the character of these expectations" (italics in original) and adds that, "there is presently no single theoretical framework that adequately deals with these relationships."

Thus, students who will bring a range of goals and expectations to their study, will also have to accommodate the expectations and practices of their lecturers and course administrators. Such expectations, which include "the quality of curriculum materials, the ways in which assessment is handled and the way in which they feel themselves being treated as individuals" (Yorke, 1999, p.27), will incorporate implicit understandings of the roles of each of the three groups – student, lecturer and administrator. These understandings will impact on the nature

and quality of experiences of interaction between the three parties.

Both Yorke and James note that the gap between expectations and experiences can give rise to adverse consequences for students and the institutions at which they study. It was this potential for misalignment, and the part in it played by an understanding of roles, that drew attention to role-related aspects of data from the overall study. In this paper, the focus is on the role occupied by the course administrators, a role in the institutional environment that has seemingly been comparatively ignored in previous research.

Since different academic contexts give terms different meanings it is important to provide some preliminary clarification. Here, the term 'course' refers to a unit of study, a series of which, together, makes up a programme. A 'programme' is a collection of courses that, when successfully passed, allows a student to take out a qualification such as a degree, diploma or certificate. Finally, the word 'administrator' in this discussion refers to a person who is located within an academic department offering a course, and who provides administrative assistance to course participants (teaching staff and students).

Insights from Quality Assurance

The study's overall focus on quality necessitated an initial examination of frameworks for quality assurance of distance education (e.g., Quality Matters Rubrics and Standards <https://www.qualitymatters.org>; Online Learning Consortium Quality Framework <https://onlinelearningconsortium.org/5-pillars/>) and sets of principles (e.g., Ragan, 1999; Volery & Lord, 2000). These show that there are generally agreed upon core standards, practices and expectations that underlie well-functioning and effective distance education. Based upon assumptions about students, these frameworks have a predominantly institutional focus that indicate the influence that various roles can have on the learning and support of distance students. The following sections highlight major points about roles from the literature and provide background against which the context of the current study can be examined.

The Student Experience

Many studies undertaken in a variety of different contexts and settings have shown that there is a range of personal, social and academic factors that influence and determine the distance student learning experience (e.g., Northcote & Gosselin, 2017; Rush, 2015; Zhang & Kenny, 2010). Studies show the importance of: well-timed academic, social and personal support intervention from teachers and other staff (e.g., McLoughlan, 2002; Rush, 2015; Simpson, 2004); sensitivity to changing needs of students across a course of study and the changing nature of the support students require (e.g., Baxter, 2012; Brown, Hughes, Keppell, Hard & Smith, 2015; Kahu, Stephens, Leach, & Zepke, 2015); the influence of student self-efficacy and identity on motivation and resilience, (e.g., Abitt & Klett, 2007; Baxter, 2012; Xaio, 2012); and, the effects that differences between student and teacher expectations and perceptions of distance education can have on learning and how development of appropriate expectations can be facilitated (e.g., Bedi, 2006; White, 1999). A dominant theme of these studies - that positive learning experiences are more likely to lead to enhanced learning and course completion - provides the rationale for ensuring that support is provided at a number of levels to maximise the potential for students to experience success and satisfaction in their studies.

Teachers, Teaching and the Course

Research about the distance student experience has generated and influenced complementary research about teachers and teaching, often with a focus on the course as the place where student and teacher cross paths. The nature, technique and effect of course and instructional design have been of particular interest for many years (e.g., Dick & Carey, 1978; Gagné, 1973; Gustafson & Branch, 2003; Ritchie, Klein & Tracey, 2011) and the adoption of digital technologies has broadened the scope and richness of this area of research. A strong thrust of such studies gives weight to theoretical notions about online and distance student learning, such as those proposed by Garrison and colleagues (e.g., Garrison, Anderson & Archer, 2000) about communities of inquiry (CoI), Salmon's (2012) five-stage model of e-learning and Laurillard's (2013) notion of teaching as a design science.

In the general higher education literature the topic of teacher beliefs and practices and their connection with course design development and with student learning outcomes, expectations and study behaviours has been well documented over many years (e.g., Biggs & Tang, 2011). These have included studies about the distance learning environment (e.g., Anderson, Lee, Simpson, & Stein, 2011; Lawrence & Lentle-Keenan, 2013) and distance teaching practices as experienced by distance students (e.g., Jelfs, Richardson & Price, 2009).

Other associated areas of research that indicate the roles of teachers and administration/ professional staff include those that investigate the worth, place and value of information and communication technologies to mediate

communication and the critical factors to ensure effectiveness (e.g., Menchaca & Bekele, 2008); how ICTs can be used to increase student sense of belonging (e.g., Crampton & Ragusa, 2015); and the connections that a distance course has with the workplace (e.g., Conrad, 2008), including recognition of the sources of learning and support that are within the learner's own contexts, both personal and professional (e.g., Watson, 2013).

As such, roles and contributions of staff and students can be gleaned from this literature along with how those roles are or could be enacted within the many institutional functions, arrangements and operations. All these factors serve to influence and determine the distance student experience and the nature of their engagement in their learning and wider education.

Administering distance education

A plethora of studies have also explored the role of administration and the organisational arrangements that support distance education. For example: description of the ways that wider support services and the staff who provide those services contribute to student satisfaction and retention (e.g., Graham & Regan, 2016); consideration of the challenges related to stakeholders, priorities and resourcing in the provision of up to date technologies to be used within teaching and learning (Power & Gould-Morven, 2011); reviews, assessments and evaluations of infrastructure, systems and applications (e.g., Nichols, 2016). The focus of this literature essentially is on institutional inputs, management, resourcing and the development and fine-tuning of systems to improve and increase efficiencies (e.g., Christensen, Howard, Christensen, 2015) often with a goal of increasing economies of scale. Support for students and teaching staff, organisational arrangements, institutional infrastructure, governance and policy are discussed in terms of whole entities or functions, rather than in relation to the individual participants within those systems (e.g., Angolia & Pagliari, 2016).

Distance education thus tends to be portrayed as a large scale (business) enterprise (Rubin, 2013). In seeking to better understand our unique distance learning situation, the broader ideas and core principles presented in the literature do provide assistance. However, on a more specific level, literature about small scale distance learning arrangements is scant, with comparatively little attention being paid to the individuals within the administrative system and arrangements. In a small scale distance education operation, individuals play a more prominent role. Students, teachers and the administrative staff who work in support of both those groups are more closely connected.

The next section describes the context and explains why it is, by necessity, small in scale. Following that, the research design and method are discussed and the role of administrators is explored based on the perceptions and expectations of students, lecturers and administrators themselves.

Context for the Research

The site of the project was a New Zealand university that offers undergraduate and postgraduate courses through both distance and face-to-face modes of study. In several ways, the university's distance programme is very different from that of other dual-mode institutions. First, very few courses at the university are offered in both modes. Those courses that are offered in both modes are almost all only at the undergraduate level. Second, the scale of the distance offerings is small, comprising only around 4.5% of total EFTS (equivalent full time students) at the university. Finally, while all Divisions (the same institutional structure as a Faculty or College) of the university offer some distance courses, the large majority are offered through one Division - the Division of Health Sciences - at the postgraduate level. The predominance of Health Science distance courses arises because of the university's commitment to provide ongoing advanced professional education for the New Zealand health workforce. Other Divisions offering distance postgraduate courses also follow the path of providing courses primarily targeted at those people already in the workforce who wish to pursue advanced qualifications in their areas of expertise.

The institution's focus on advanced workforce education within New Zealand has a logical consequence, that is, small class size. Nearly all courses offered by distance at the postgraduate level have low numbers of enrolments. The average enrolment in distance courses at the postgraduate level is 10.4 students per course with two-thirds of distance courses having fewer than 10 enrolments.

The reasons for this small class size are clear. New Zealand has a population of around four and a half million. The requirement for advanced or specialist qualifications in most health areas is very limited. As an illustration, there is no need to provide advanced education for large numbers of ophthalmologists every year -- provision for fewer than ten usually suffices. However, the need for this education to occur in the New Zealand context is a vital part of ensuring a culturally aware workforce. This workforce -- especially health sector workers - must be attuned to

the needs of New Zealand's diverse population, and understand the implications of the Treaty of Waitangi, one of New Zealand's founding documents.

The small size of courses combined with the modest scale of distance education at the university has had an impact on the nature of the administration of distance education. The university has largely eschewed the notion of centralised operational functions for distance education. The provision of information technology services (e.g. a learning management system and web conferencing facilities) and student management services (e.g. enrolment in, and withdrawal from, courses) are part of core university services. However, much in the way of course design, development and maintenance, support services for distance students, publicity of courses and programmes of study is devolved to individual departments and the leaders (or academic coordinators) and administrators of the distance programmes within them. This devolution has meant that, over time, lecturing staff and the administrators supporting distance programmes have developed approaches to the conduct and administration of distance education that seem to vary from the more centralised approaches that pertain within organisations with larger scale distance offerings. The small enrolments, the relative lack of central oversight, the absence of institutionally required standards for course production, and the only minimal accessibility to material production services, all seem to run counter to an effective and successful distance programme at institutional and individual levels (Angolia & Pagliari, 2016).

Despite the devolution and consequent lack of connection between the distance programmes, similarities in operation exist across departments. Departments typically offer several programmes of study comprising several courses. At the postgraduate level these are usually Certificate (two courses), Diploma (four courses) or Masters (the equivalent of eight courses) programmes of study. Each department will have a single administrator involved with the administration of the distance programmes it offers, although that person might also be involved in other departmental administrative duties. The administrator works alongside each of the academic coordinators of the distance programmes and the teaching staff involved. Administrators will also have contact with students since they typically serve as the initial, and often ongoing, contact person for course or programme enquiries.

Design and Methods

The overall aim of this project was to investigate and build understandings of the range of experiences of professionally-oriented distance education from the perspectives of small groups of students, teachers and administrators. An overarching interpretivist approach (Erickson, 1986) shaped the design of the investigation.

Setting

The study was undertaken in one university in New Zealand. The university's top level strategy document lays down its commitment to distance learning, particularly at a postgraduate level in areas where it has a particular expertise. As described earlier in the paper, the majority of distance programmes at the institution offer professional qualifications. The vast majority of students are working, usually in full-time employment, are studying part-time and are scattered throughout the country and overseas. The large majority of courses are taught to small numbers of students involved in what are often highly specialised areas.

Also described earlier, the distance education system at the institution is not a centralised one. Rather, in contrast with the practices of nearly all large distance providers, the system is quite devolved in terms of both responsibilities and authority, with each academic department, or even programme within a department, having control of the processes for teaching and course development and implementation. Even though all academic departments have control over their programmes, there is light-handed oversight through a central office and more formal oversight in terms of quality assurance mechanisms that govern all university programmes and courses.

Participants and data gathering processes

Staff (lecturers and administrators) and students from ten of the postgraduate distance courses at the institution, were invited to participate in the study. The ten courses were purposively chosen (Palys, 2008) from across the four main discipline areas, namely, health sciences, science, business and humanities, to increase the likelihood that a range of experiences and perspectives were included in the data. One-to-one semi-structured interviews were conducted with each of 10 lecturers, 10 administrators and 12 students. The interview questions prompted participants to share their experiences as they related to involvement in the course and the institution, and concerning the relevance to the students' workplaces. Interviews were audio recorded, then recordings were transcribed verbatim. Each participant was invited to review his or her transcript, to confirm its accuracy and to amend as necessary, before analysis.

Analysis

The researchers used NVivo to facilitate a constant comparative technique as part of a thematic analysis of the interview data (Silverman, 2001) in order to develop a series of themes that captured the spirit of the experiences as described by the administrators. This process involved reading and re-reading the transcripts to identify major and common ideas (Mayring, 2000), which were then summarised. Further reflection on those summaries, in the light of the literature and the overarching goals of the study, resulted in the development of three meta-themes. These meta-themes, which focus on the role of the administrators, capture the essence of the synthesised experiences expressed by the participants in the interviews.

Findings and Discussion

This section focuses on the role of the administrator in small-scale distance education. As highlighted earlier, the role of administrator is not often investigated in depth in the distance education literature with the specificity provided here. The nature of that role, the relationships encompassed within the role and the goals administrators pursue, all form part of the discussion.

According to the administrators, it is through (a) relationship-building, (b) mediation, and (c) bridging, that they deliberately act to enhance and nurture partnerships between and amongst teaching staff, students and the broader institution and to make connections across the spaces between and amongst course, student, institution, and workplace. They describe their role as being linked very closely to student learning and decisions about their actions are undertaken with positive student learning outcomes and experience, and progression through a course of study as firm foci.

Each of these three areas will be discussed, drawing on perspectives and experiences expressed by the participants in the interviews.

Relationship-building: Distance learning administrators build long term relationships with students

The starting point is that the administrators in this study all realise and accept the need to build relationships with the students. Such relationships are built up from before enrolment, continue until the point of graduation and, in some cases, extend after that as well. An administrator expresses this continuity in the following way:

My role covers from the minute a student first makes an inquiry to us about what papers [courses] they may want to undertake...right through to when they graduate. ...So it is a real relationship and you do get to know them and what kind of makes them tick. (Administrator)

Baxter (2012) highlights the importance of good management of early expectations of students and this is contingent upon the development of effective relationships with those representing the university. But maintaining contact and continuing this relationship is essential.

The following quotations demonstrate that continuity. A student talks about valuable early interaction with a course administrator, and a lecturer notes how that interaction between administrator and student is ongoing throughout the course:

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All my learning has been in, you know, in lecture theatres, in seminars, by person rather than in distance learning. So I, I was a little cautious and I felt very much reassured by [name] who was the [course administrator] who encouraged me to just give it a go which, which was the right thing to do and so I've done one semester and I did enjoy it hugely and I do want to continue (Student).

Well I know what they [students] get and it's over and above what she's paid for, which is our administrator who provides very personal advice and support as things happen during the course (Lecturer)

If undertaken poorly, such ongoing contact can inhibit relationship building, but student perceptions of such contact were typically expressed in positive terms, similar to those of the students quoted below:

I would say I do feel I'm treated as a VIP customer (laughs) at the university because there's, there's very personal, very personal service there, like from [the course administrator] and the team from the [course]

(Student)

Yeah, [the course administrator] has been my, my go to point and she's, you know, she's been brilliant (Student)

Thus, the administrators say that they are the people who become an ongoing point of stability for the students. They are routinely in contact with students right across the programme, over a number of years, as indicated in this quotation:

It's about that relationship building and getting them comfortable enough to come to me and ask questions and that sort of thing. (Administrator)

That makes the job interesting, having that, you know while it might, you know take a bit longer, in the end you're kind of seeing one person through... I see them right from when they apply to the programme, go through, pass all the papers [courses] and then graduate (Administrator)

Students supported this view of ongoing contact. The following quote illustrates the recognition of this kind of support from the course administrators:

you start thinking about what's ahead and ... I'm nearly over halfway through the compulsory papers [courses] so I'm, yeah, definitely starting to look at that. But anyway, I know if I ask [the course administrator] that, they'll give me a steer. (Student)

It is rare for any lecturer to have continuing contact of that nature. Instead, lecturers acknowledge (sometimes only implicitly) the value of the relationship administrators have with students and encourage and support that relationship.

[the course administrator] is great. She's just totally excellent, and (she's) there as our front person and, and then she asks us questions to which she can't (find an) answer and you know, (she's) there to respond quickly and treat people respectfully and get back to them quickly. (Lecturer)

I guess I'm there to support [the course administrator] with decisions and options and general advice (Lecturer)

Administrators do not do anything that might be termed 'academic' for the students: they do not teach them; they do not assess their work; they do not impinge on any lecturer's or student's area of professional expertise. This division of roles and responsibilities is recognised by administrators and lecturers, and illustrated in these excerpts from the interviews:

It's my job just to manage and maintain their academic record to some extent, and to manage their relationship so they keep coming back to us. It's the academics' job to ensure academic integrity and standards are met. (Administrator)

she's [the course administrator] often the first port of call, 50 percent of the time, say but she deals with more the logistical problems. I deal more with the educational problems, I guess. It's the way it works out. (Lecturer)

Thus, the relationship that administrators work to build with students is a long term one with an ultimate focus on maintaining student involvement with the programme (rather than the course) and the institution. What these administrators do is help students to navigate the often tricky waters of institutional structures and decipher and respond to lecturers' demands, thus helping to communicate and align expectations (Bedi, 2006; White, 1999).

Mediation: Distance learning administrators mediate between students and lecturers

From the starting point of a relationship that often began before course enrolment, it is not surprising that students are often prepared to talk with programme administrators about a range of course and institutional matters. The lecturers are, after all, both initially unknown and in a position of some power in relation to the students. So, while students and lecturers can and do develop closer relationships during the course of a semester, the administrator is still often the first port of call for students who are experiencing difficulties with some aspect of their engagement with their study or with the institution.

When asked who responded to queries from students, one lecturer responded by saying

It's not particularly clear cut, and it [the student query] usually ends up coming to (name) who's our administrator for the whole programme (Lecturer)

However, administrators and lecturers usually work closely with each other in solving student issues. The lecturer quoted above went on to say that students with queries will:

just copy me in or copy (the course administrator) in because, ... often it's not clear to us either. So one of us will just ask the other one. (Lecturer).

This interplay was confirmed by other lecturers in other programmes with comments such as this:

the administrator's going to come to me anyway ... and say, look can this person have an extension or not or what do we do? How do we manage this? (Lecturer)

Such interplay comes after that first contact and is not often seen by the student. The point of first contact needs to be with someone who is trusted and known, especially when the issue is troubling to the student. One administrator talked to this point in these terms:

Once again it comes back to that whole thing that I talked about in that very first question... of forming those relationships ... And when times are tough, I'm the one that gets the phone call ... and deals with the tears ... more times than not ... Yeah. People talk to me but they don't talk to the lecturer (Administrator)

Despite this, administrators recognised that their dialogue with students was primarily a mediating dialogue, as in

Sometimes I might go down to a [lecturer's] office and say, I've just been talking to so-and-so and they're like, oh yes! ... So, yeah, I'm always of that mind set of I'd rather over-inform people almost by saying, look, just letting you know this. You might already know it but this is what's going on ... People can just say, 'ohh yeah, I did know. Thanks very much.' Or, 'no, I didn't. You know, tell me more.' (Administrator)

In other words, administrators see themselves as taking on the role of, in the words of one administrator, a “go-between”. Thus, they provide much needed and timely ‘intervention’ when necessary, to help the generally independent, well-motivated student remain engaged in their learning, the importance of which is well-illustrated in the literature (e.g., McLoughlan, 2002; Rush, 2015; Simpson, 2004).

Administrators feel they have a special role because they know the students and their actions help the students to succeed within the programme. The administrators therefore have a longer term goal than an individual lecturer might have. Administrators work to bring student and lecturer together, without ‘treading on the toes’ of either, in the long term interests of both the student and the programme.

I'm the main administrative staff in terms of [being] the pivotal point between the lecturer and the students and making sure everything runs (Administrator)

The direction of communication through administrators in this mediating role is all one way: the student initiates a query with the administrator. We did not come across any instance of a lecturer asking an administrator to serve a mediating function in communication with a student. This seems to highlight the previous point about power imbalance in the student-lecturer relationship, but it may simply demonstrate uncertainty in that relationship, with the administrator seen as a neutral conduit. Whichever it is, the administrator clearly provides a mechanism for reasonably effective communication especially at the outset of any course when the lecturer is an unknown quantity.

Bridging: Distance Learning administrators smooth the way at an institutional level through bridging gaps and forging connections

Administrators see their role as working with, or on behalf of, students to help them meet university requirements:

you spend a bit of time doing your best for the student because I kind of feel that I'm kind of the link between the university and the distance students. (Administrator)

“Doing your best” had a definite focus on ensuring students were not impeded by university processes. One administrator noted that *‘the processes within the university don't meet the needs of the students, so we're a constant go between, between other departments saying this, this student needs to do this but you won't let them’*, while another reported that:

we're trying to develop lifelong learners ...and these people are quite engaged ... they want to learn and they've kind of got the thirst for knowledge ... but they are working full-time and they are busy and sometimes processes are cumbersome and they get, can get quite frustrated. So it's a case of just really supporting them through (Administrator).

It was also evident that helping students could mean, in the words of one of the administrator participants, “work on work arounds... to make things go a lot smoother” (Administrator).

The administrators were fairly uniform in their view that the distance students had a relatively uncomplicated view of the university. Administrators thought students did not recognise, or did not acknowledge that they recognised, that there were many separate units and functions within the institution that they needed to deal with. Further, they thought students believed that dealing with one person in their programme would be sufficient:

their view, especially for distance students, returning students, their view of the university is, ah, one person that they have been dealing with. (Administrator)

I just feel that, I don't mean I'm the university for these students, I'm the face of the university, if you know what I mean ... I'm the person that they're talking to. So whether they have a good experience with (the university) in some respects, is kind of down to how I'm able to help them (Administrator)

For their part, students certainly indicated that contact with ‘the university’ was primarily through their programme administrator. However, it is unclear whether that was because students did not recognise the breadth of university services or because they did recognise that administrators had broad knowledge of the university and they could take advantage of that.

The following two responses are typical of how students responded when asked about university administrative processes. The statements support the student view of the administrator as the point of contact for the university, not just the for the programme in which students were enrolled.

so in terms of like enrolment, if there are any problems, they [the administrator] will help you out, and also the scheduling, they'll help you out so that's pretty good (Student)

Like for me, it has been easy ... probably because of that direct contact with the departmental, you know administration and also, it was easy, (Student)

In a similar vein, while discussing finding resources within the wider university and how they might be discovered, one student said that

Well, for my own experience, I haven't really needed to but I found [Administrator] is very very helpful and very responsive in terms of coming back to you on stuff. So if I had something, I would go to her (Student)

According to Prebble, Hargreaves, Leach, Naidoo, Suddaby and Zepke (2004), a welcoming, efficient and comprehensive range of institutional environments and processes contribute to successful student outcomes. The administrator’s bridging role in this regard is important. Arguably administrators are enabling the students we interviewed to engage more fully with a range of university services and to traverse university administrative processes more easily. They help build bridges for the distance student to access services, support and administrative processes more efficiently and successfully than if the student had to navigate the complexities of the wider institution on their own. Having said this though, this bridging role may undercut the need for students to “mobilise rather than alienate potential sources of support” and may also subvert “the need for a more profound shift in institutional ethos, recognizing that students are people for whom the learning experience may be practically demanding” (Lowe & Gayle, p.234).

Conclusion

In our small-scale distance education context, we argue that the administrators are central to the successful engagement and retention of distance students at the institution. The administrators’ role is generally hidden or overlooked, and not usually seen as key to enabling student learning in any direct way. The administrator role in distance education is not generally addressed in the literature on this level.

Conceptualising a distance learning administrator's role as being about relationship-building, mediation and bridging enables the future framing of the role itself. Articulating the main functions of the administrator's role in terms of these three elements informs role development as well as facilitation of resource distribution to enable the

role to be enacted well.

Effective distance education is contingent on the contributions of students, teachers and administrators, and on the understanding these groups have of each other's perspectives of distance education. Building a picture from a common foundation (i.e., the same course) of the varying perspectives, has provided useful insights into the practice of distance education and will enable implications to be drawn about ways to design and structure distance education processes to support students in their distance studies.

Solutions to implementing processes and practices that reflect good distance education principles cannot be the same as those of larger scale operations. It is not possible to develop the intricate systems and build economies of scale that are usually the focus of efforts of larger scale ventures. In undertaking this project, we have gained insights about distance education at our institution, and we now have research evidence that can inform wider literature. This is especially important as small-scale distance learning is not an area that is being addressed. The outcomes of this project enable us to ensure that, for our (unique) higher education context, we are facilitating personal and operational development that will enrich learning experience of the distance student. The study outcomes provide clarity about the hidden, but very important, role of the administrator in supporting the small scale distance learning operation.

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