Open Research Online

What factors promote student resilience on a level 1 distance learning module?

Journal Item

oro.open.ac.uk

What factors promote student resilience on a level 1 distance learning module?

Joan Simons, Kythe Beaumont & Lesley Holland

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Check for updates

What factors promote student resilience on a level 1 distance learning module?

Joan Simons [iD], Kythe Beaumont and Lesley Holland

Faculty of Wellbeing, Education and Language Studies, The Open University, Milton Keynes, UK

ABSTRACT

Resilience is understood to be the ability to adapt positively in the face of adversity. In relation to new students on a distance learning module, this can mean how they adapt and make sense of the demands of their chosen study to enable them to persist in their studies. This article reports a small-scale study involving semi-structured telephone interviews with students on a level 1 distance learning module at the UK Open University. Students identified the challenges they experienced such as carving out time to study alongside other commitments, as well as developing their academic writing. Students also identified factors that enabled them to adapt to these challenges and be successful in continuing to study. Students rated highly the support they received from tutors in the form of tailored, detailed feedback on their assignments. Other factors that enabled students to persist in their studies were time management, self-belief and motivation.

Introduction

This study focused on level 1 students (equivalent to the first year of study towards a degree in a traditional university) who were studying a health and social care 60 credit module, which had undergone a number of revisions to improve retention. It was anticipated that focusing on the first presentation of the revised module would provide some useful data around student retention and resilience in adapting to distance learning.

The module aims to introduce students to Higher Education (HE) study within a UK health and social care context. The study strategy and assessment takes students from access level to level 1 skills. Access study would be undertaken prior to starting a degree-level qualification, aimed at students without formal qualifications, who have not studied for a long time or have not previously studied in their area of interest. The Access curriculum is called level 0 at the OU. Students also progress from print-based study to e-learning. There are 17 units and study time is approximately 10 h a week. Tuition is mixed, with a day school, one-to-one teaching sessions and asynchronous on line forums. Assessment for the cohort studied was via 5 summative assignments and an examination. Students take this module as a first step

---

towards a generalist degree or a professional qualification, and most are in full or part time work.

Relevant student demographics at the start of the presentation were typical of previous and subsequent cohorts of this particular module. Eighty-seven per cent of the students were female, 45% had no formal qualifications or had qualifications below A-level (a UK school leaver's qualification generally taken at age 18), 26% were from a low socio economic group and 68% were students new to the University. Sixty-three per cent achieved module credit.

Literature review

Resilience is a multifaceted concept, with no one agreed definition. It has been defined as 'a dynamic process wherein individuals display positive adaptation despite experiences of significant adversity or trauma' (Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000, p. 858). Most definitions are based around two core concepts: adversity and positive adaptation. Grant and Kinman (2012, p. 1) propose resilience as a positive construct which enables individuals to 'overcome stressors or withstand negative life events and, not only recover from such experiences, but also find personal meaning in them'. Resilience has also been defined as 'the potential to exhibit resourcefulness' (Pooley & Cohen, 2010, p. 30) and 'adaptive capacities under conditions of environmental, stress or uncertainty' (Klohen, 1996, p. 1068).

The challenges that students face when adapting to studying at a distance require specific adjustments to be made in order to be resilient, and this calls for a look at literature that specifically examines resilience in relation to open education, such as the work carried out by Hall and Winn (2010) who suggest that resilience 'develops engagement, education, empowerment and encouragement. Resilient forms of HE should have the capacity to help students, staff and wider communities to develop these attributes'. Such a stance suggests that the onus is on education providers to recognise students' needs and provide support that facilitates them developing resilience to promotes their likelihood of success.

Weller and Anderson (2013), who explored the issue of digital resilience in higher education by building on the work of Holling (1973), propose a definition of resilience as 'the capacity of a system to absorb disturbance and reorganise while undergoing change, so as to retain essentially the same function, structure, identity and feedbacks'. Such a stance takes a systems approach and is much broader than the focus of student resilience.

Christie, Tett, Cree, Hounsell, and McCune (2008), who explored students' experience, argue that feelings of loss and dislocation are inherent to the students' experiences of entering university, and that 'coming to know' a new community of practice is an emotional process that can incorporate negative feelings such as alienation and exclusion, as well as positive feelings of excitement and exhilaration. A broader understanding of how students adapt and learn, then, depends not just upon the individual's commitment to developing a new learning identity, but on the interaction between the student and the learning environment of the university.

The influence of emotion on resilience is considered by Goleman (2002) in his work on emotional intelligence, identifying its role in facilitating one's ability to cope with change. Similarly, Greenberg (2006) suggests that the stress associated with learning can be better adjusted to by those learners who take responsibility for their emotional state. Willans and Seary (2011) suggest there is a need to carefully manage students' immediate environment,

and to develop the protective and promotive factors that they can proactively use to build resilience. It is likely that resilience of students is linked to their ability to persist in their studies. Hart (2012) found nine facilitators of persistence in her literature review of factors that affected student persistence in online learning in the US. These were:

- Comfort with online module work
- Flexibility, asynchronous format of the module and time management
- Goal Commitment
- A high grade point average
- Quality of interactions and feedback
- Satisfaction and relevance
- Self-efficacy, personal growth and self-motivation
- Social connectedness or presence
- Support

Simpson (2013), who explored how students experienced a level 1 distance learning undergraduate module, found that there was a high level of attrition, and that most of the drop out happened in the first half of the module. These findings from Simpson's work echo the experiences of many students on our gateway level 1 module, K101, An introduction to Health and Social Care. The considerable loss of students in the first half of their first module has been a focus of concern for the module team for some time, and a number of adjustments have been made to enhance the likelihood of retaining students. The revisions involved an increase in study skills, a revision of the assessment load, and the introduction of more focused one-to-one tuition. However, to date students have not been asked about their resilience or what helped them to persist on the module.

Research questions

The two research questions that we sought to answer were:

(1) How do students who receive what they perceive to be a low grade respond when they get their assignment back?
(2) What factors enable those students to continue with the module?

Methodology

The investigation was qualitative, using semi-structured telephone interviews. The rationale for choosing interviews was that the nature of semi-structured interviews enables some flexibility in discussion of issues of interest with students.

The interview questions were broadly based around how students felt when they received their grade and their feedback, what they were expecting, what they did that helped them progress, and whether there was anything else that the university or their tutor could have done to help.

Sample

Our method of sampling was purposive, selecting students who had submitted both assignment 2 and assignment 3, as this has been a point of vulnerability in previous cohorts for loss of students from the module. Our initial target group was students who had received a grade of up to 54% (group A) in assignment 2. This consisted of 32 students, therefore the likelihood of gaining 20–30 interviewees was small. We received 1 response after an initial email message and a further response after sending a follow up letter to the remaining 31 students. Due to the low response rate from group A, it was decided to change the original method of contact with students from just one contact and send a follow up by letter to non-respondents. It was also decided to widen the sample and contact a group of 98 students who received 55–69% for assignment 2 (called group B) and –a group of 102 students who had received 70% or more for assignment 2 (called group C) – see Table 1.

The low response rate is in line with another project led by the first author exploring the factors that influenced level 1 students to leave their module without notifying their tutor or the university (Simons, Murphy, & Gill, 2017). It had been identified that significant student numbers (approximately 17–24%) were silently withdrawing from the module, and the project explored the rationale and potential solutions for this. Of 1,200 past students who were posted letters of invitation as part of that project, only 16 positive responses were received.

Data collection

The low response rate and the subsequent widening of the sample caused us to revisit one of our concerns around not wishing to make assumptions about students' perceptions of low grades. We had previously planned to interview students who had received a lower grade, assuming that they might need additional resilience in order to submit the next assignment. However, widening the sample and carefully wording letters and emails to the students enabled students to define for themselves whether they were pleased with the grade they received, and whether they felt it was low or not.

We reviewed our project in the light of the low response rate and subsequent decision to widen the sample. The research questions were adjusted to reflect students' self-definition of a low grade, and we felt more comfortable with this approach as we were not making assumptions about a student's definition of a low grade.

We also considered changing the focus of the project to look at progression from different assignments, however we agreed that looking at the first assignment would not be helpful as students were getting used to the module and studying at a distance, and looking at later assignments would not enable us to see progression or persistence within the module.

Nineteen students responded positively to the invitation to be interviewed, however, seven students subsequently declined to be interviewed – this may have been due to the closeness of the written examination on the module. Some had forgotten they were to be

Table 1. Summary of student recruitment.

	30–54% – group A	55–69% – group B	70% + group C	Total
Number of students contacted	32	98	102	232
Number of respondents	2	6	11	19
Number of interviews	1	3	8	12

interviewed and others were uncontactable and withdrew from the process. We interviewed twelve students between the end of March and mid-May 2015, one male student and eleven female students. Eight of the respondents were new to OU distance learning study. The remaining four had studied before either at Level 1 or at level 0 (the Access modules offered at the OU). One student was studying K101 alongside another 60 credit level 1 module.

The sample broadly reflected the demographics of the student cohort at the start of the presentation. Written informed consent was achieved from all students included in the study. The project was reviewed and approved by the University Student Research Project Panel.

Data analysis

The twelve interviews were recorded and transcribed. The transcripts were analysed by three of the project team using thematic data analysis (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). This involved reading and rereading all the interview transcripts until themes emerged. Initially seven themes were identified, which were then collapsed down to four. Quotes used from the interviews in the next section are coded by the number of the interview 1–12 followed by the line number where the quote starts, within the interview transcript.

Findings

The themes that emerged from the data were:

- Challenges of studying a level 1 distance learning module
- Factors that helped students persist on the module
- Support
- Advice to future Students.

Challenges of studying a level 1 distance learning module

We asked the students what had been their biggest challenges so far on module K101. Their responses indicated that time was by far the biggest challenge, whether it was balancing time between study and other commitments, or organising and managing time to study.

One student felt that it was;

Just time management really, just getting through it, just the basis of getting through all the information. You know, it's just that balance between normal life and student life when you're doing both full time basically. (4:296)

whilst another student went further to explain the tensions between study and normal life;

I think [the biggest challenge is} organising your time properly and making sure that you do. Because when you are a mum……you can feel a little bit guilty that you're not spending time with your family. (6:257)

Students explained that there can be many demands on their time:

Balancing caring for my dad, balancing the new job. (12:198)

A further challenge was that of *writing*, as many students were new to studying at under-graduate level.

> The writing side of it….the content I can understand … it's the academic writing side of it is what I have struggled the most on. (9:86)

> Just basically the TMAs (assignments), because I struggle… in essays to start with. (1:203)

> There are 3 things we all seem to be struggling with – referencing, essay writing and putting things in your own words. (1:89)

This student summed up her thoughts as follows:

> Learning how to approach an essay, how to formulate my thoughts and ideas. Because the number of times I have started down one path and thought no, not happy with that, that's not right. And I have had to restart. So I think for me that's what I find difficult, really picking out the information I need from the start, the relevant information, and getting in some sort of working order. So for me, I guess the structure's maybe the hardest thing in choosing the content that should be in it. (10:132)

Another challenge was studying, both getting down to actually doing the study as well as studying alone. One student found that there were plenty of other distractions around the home and garden instead of studying module K101 and she would often choose ironing rather than writing her assignment.

Another felt isolated:

> [my biggest challenge was] just doing the study – feeling that I'm just doing it on my own. (8:122)

Factors that helped students persist on the module

Four factors were identified by students that helped them to continue on the module despite the challenges they experienced: tutor feedback, time management, motivation and self-belief.

Tutor feedback on each assignment received by students was considered valued information tailored to each individual. One student explained how they used their tutor's feedback by reading the grade first, then the feedback about a week before the next assignment;

> There was no relevance in me seeing what I had done wrong until I needed to use it again basically. It served its purpose and I thought well I'll use the feedback that's there. (1:175)

Another student reported appreciating receiving balanced feedback on her written work;

> The feedback … is very thorough, which has definitely helped me to continue. It gave me something to work towards…. Because I think if I'd had just been given positives I'd have struggled to do my further assignment wondering why I'd got what I had and how I could improve on it. (3:112)

Other students were looking for feedback around specific areas or found it useful to go back and keep checking the feedback, as it was always there for reference.

Time management is a common theme of study skills development. Our respondents were pragmatic about what they studied – one said they did not engage with the forum or online support due to lack of time. Other time management solutions included maximising the peaks and troughs of the module and available time, and doing blocks of study at the weekend when there was more time.

> I have started so I am going to do it … it's been difficult at times to fit it in, I have ran through several topics in a day and a half and binged it when I have had time to spare. (4:197)

One student 'chunked' questions or saved them up before ringing the tutor so she had a list of questions for the tutor, whilst another student took the longer view about studying for the qualification BA/BSc Health and Social Care, by taking a year at a time – pacing the study.

Another factor that students reported helped them to continue on the module was being motivated. The fact that someone else was paying encouraged one student to continue:

> Why I ended up with K101 was because my employer offered…. there was a grant available. (1:258)

Another student was paying for herself, which provided motivation to complete the module:

> I am paying for it myself. So I think that gives me enough motivation to think that I'm actually spending quite a lot of money, and it keeps me going that way. I don't want to waste it. (9:88)

Others talked about aiming for a degree and that provided sufficient motivation to continue:

> A lot of it is to do with my motivation personally, because I know where I want to end up with my degree. (3:141)

Having a reason to study provided motivation.

> it's the discipline of doing it that keeps me going, keeps me motivated. (1:356)

The fourth factor that helped students persist on the module related to confidence or self-belief. Several students talked about their confidence and self-belief/resilience and how that helped them persist with their studies. Whether that was belief in themselves;

> I got a pass 1 on my last assignment so I've obviously got something. (7:232)

Or in the system;

> I just have to think that the tutors want you to pass. (10:61)

and a belief that their writing would improve by the time they moved up to level 2.

Students described dealing with challenges one at a time and not being overwhelmed. Two students made a pragmatic decision about how they studied – one brought books to work to study as there was no Internet availability, another used the online learning guides at work during night shifts and free time, demonstrating how they adapted to studying whilst fitting it around their other commitments.

Support

Support came from a variety of sources, some of which were 'institutional' from the OU – tutor, Student Support Team, module materials or structure of the module, or 'emotional' – from fellow students, colleagues, friends and family. Others had found 'study buddies' among current students on the same course. Students reported that encountering fellow students who admitted to struggling in the module-related chat room, or in the module forum, helped them realise they were not alone, and they also witnessed support being provided by other students and the module tutors;

> you can see where there's the support coming in from other tutors and other students. (2:220)

The nature of the written feedback – in text comments as well as a summary sheet and the support from the tutor online or at the end of the phone, was commented on positively by most students.

> The student support's very good, I can't knock it. If I rung up, no matter what time I've had to ring up, even if it's not the person I need to speak to they've been brilliant. I can't, really cannot fault them at all. I would recommend Open University to anybody. (6:387)

Students also reported that even if the student did not call on the tutor for support, it was enough to know that they were there if needed.

Advice to future students

We asked the students what they would advise students who were planning to undertake the module the following year. Time featured again – students made suggestions about the need to use time well, planning time and reading ahead if possible and making sure the prospective student has planned time for study.

Many students advised future students not to panic:

> don't stress over anything, and certainly don't panic over the questions … follow the instructions for the essays, follow the structure. (4:346)

To get the most out of the module, students recommended that future students should read *The Good Study Guide*. Making notes, using the resources that are there, and asking questions were suggested by some. Students were also keen to stress that help was there if needed.

A sub theme running through the student responses was one of encouragement. Phrases like 'definitely do it' and 'go for it' were used by more than one student.

One student was moved to say:

> It's really good. I think it's a very positive module and it makes you think, it really does make you think in a completely different way about things. (12:297)

Discussion

The findings of the interviews provided information on the challenges students faced when studying an online undergraduate module, and their resourcefulness in how they adapted to be able to cope with these challenges. By developing resilience in this way students articulated how they managed to persist in their studies. The challenges that students reported were somewhat predictable, in that the majority of the students interviewed were new to study and therefore were likely to have had to make quite an adjustment to enable them to manage their time to fit in the new pressure of studying the module materials. The other adjustment students had to make was to utilise the feedback from their tutors in developing their academic writing skills, to enable them to achieve success in the assessment of the module. Tutors were influential in helping students to adjust to the new challenges, and were able to promote learning by providing appropriate, timely support.

Coping with study on a level 1 module

Many of the students we interviewed identified factors that enabled them to carry on studying, even when time and resources were in short supply on this first module. This involved careful management of their time, as well as being resourceful in how they used tutors' feedback on their assignments. Identification of such coping strategies demonstrated students' ability to develop their resilience by adapting to the increased stress associated with

limited time, and juggling the demands of work and personal commitments. They learned to limit their expectations in terms of marks awarded, and identify the elements of study that would enable them to pass the module. Boström and Lassen (2006) indicate that if students can gain control over their learning they are much more likely to succeed. This achievement can increase an individual's resilience and ability to overcome adversity to continue in their study. Xuereb (2015) explored the views of 175 psychology students and identified doubters and non-doubters. She defines doubters as those 'seriously considering terminating one's studies (i.e. leaving the university), and so the doubt is more than a short spell of frustration.'

Doubters using this definition are more likely to leave their studies prematurely. Xuereb's findings suggest that non-doubters were likely to be mature students who had more resourcefulness, could more effectively engage with their studies, and had greater academic resourcefulness and adaptive coping skills. Many of the students' responses in this study indicated that students recognised their limitations and used their knowledge of them to study more effectively.

Many students stated they were going to stick with the module come what may, consequently their coping strategies reflected this. They would spend little time on elements of the module they felt did not enhance their study and they would focus upon those things that would – such as tutor feedback and emotional support from a member of the family. Some students decided not to use the forums as the messages were too numerous to cope with. Many students spoke of the support of family and consequently this support bolstered their resilience. Community resilience explored by Van Breda (2001) refers to the family as a protective factor increasing the resilience of individuals. For some students, colleagues and friends helped put low grades into perspective. Park and Choi (2009) found that emotional support helped students stay motivated and remain on their module, and Holder (2007) reports a similar finding where students demonstrated a degree of resourcefulness in identifying and accessing elements of support which they needed to persist on the module.

Tuition influencing learning

From our interviews with students it became apparent that K101 had many of the key elements of andragogy identified by Knowles (1985) as being important for the enhancement of the students' learning, so that the learning was meaningful to students in gaining an understanding of health and social care. These key elements of andragogy as proposed by Milligan (1995) are the facilitation of adult learning that can best be achieved by a student-centred approach that, in a developmental manner, enhances the student's self-concept, promotes autonomy, self-direction and critical thinking, reflects on experience and involves the learner in the diagnosis, planning, (en)action and evaluation of their own learning needs. The tuition strategy in K101 provides students with one-to-one telephone tuition and the opportunity to attend face-to-face group tuition and on-line group tuition alongside the extensive balanced feedback provided by tutors on each of 5 summative assignments. This approach provides students with the ability to grow in knowledge and skills as they progress through the module. Students had been advised to use the feedback from each assignment in the preparation of their subsequent work, which provided students with the support to develop their writing skills. This approach can also be referred to as spiralling (Bruner, 1966) in that the student visits and revisits an issue whilst increasing in their

knowledge. The students had the opportunity through detailed tutor feedback to grow in confidence and feel ready for each subsequent, more challenging assignment. It also provided the students the opportunity to develop their critical thinking skills by following the knowledge domains from Bloom's (1956) taxonomy, moving from knowledge or remembering, to application and on towards evaluation.

Moore (2012) suggests that one of the teacher's central tasks is to motivate the student to want to learn. Bruner (1966) promotes a model of pedagogy in which the teacher is a facilitator of student exploration. He suggests that a 'cut and dried routine task provides little exploration; one that is too uncertain may arouse confusion and anxiety, with the effect of reducing exploration.' Therefore there is a need to achieve a balance in a given task, so that the student understands the task and on completion of it is motivated to learn more. In our interviews students appeared to value the feedback they received from tutors and used it to guide their next assignment.

Research by Wojtas (1998) found that many students improved their work once they understood the purpose of feedback and assessment criteria. Weaver (2006), who examined students' perception of written feedback, suggests that alerting students to their strengths and weaknesses can provide the means by which they can assess their performance and make improvements to future work. Constructive criticism is valued by students and motivates them to improve. However, Ellery (2007) suggests students seldom have opportunities to act on feedback, except in some vague indeterminate way in the future. In many programmes of study, summative assessment is timed at a terminal point in a module, therefore students can overlook the relevance of feedback as they have then completed the module and do not recognise the relevance of the information provided (Duncan, 2007). On K101 however, the staged assignments throughout the module provide students with a set of linked opportunities for learning and advancing their knowledge through a series of tutor feedback.

As indicated earlier The Open University prides itself on a system of correspondence tuition student feedback that includes both feedback and feed-forward, so that students have a balance of information. Feedback that focuses on students' errors or inadequacies has been negatively linked to issues of retention and engagement in first year learners (Harvey, Drew, & Smith, 2006). Whereas Yorke and Longdon (2008) suggest that dedicating attention to building student strengths in the form of feed-forward enhances first year learners' engagement with study and optimises chances of individual success. Feed-forward offers a critical opportunity to explain not just criteria but also task compliance and quality and to provide a direction for performance throughout a module (Sadler, 2010). A meta-analysis conducted by Hattie and Timperley (2007) in their conceptual analysis of feedback suggest that the most effective forms of feedback provides cues or reinforcement to learners. Feedback is more effective when it provides information on correct rather than incorrect responses, and when it builds on changes from previous work. It was clear from students' responses in this study that tutor feedback was used by students to prepare for each subsequent assignment.

Chetwynd and Dobbyn (2010) suggest that in higher education, effective feedback on student assessments plays a vital role in retention and in the development of self-regulating learners, particularly in their first year. It could be suggested that the students' responses demonstrated how the support from the tuition on the module provided them with the ability to self-regulate their learning, in particular through the use of feedback on the linked

assignments, which in turn contributed to them developing resilience and the ability to persist on the module.

Support

It was clear that the support students' received enabled them to devise strategies to cope with the challenges of their distance learning study. As stated earlier, students viewed support in two broad categories – 'Institutional' and 'Emotional'. Tait (2003, p. 4) in his editorial reflecting on the past 10 years of open and distance learning, outlines how 'Institutional Support' helps students:

> student support, especially student guidance and counselling, tutor support and effective information and administrative systems all provide a range of activity that impacts……. affectively…… reinforcing the student sense of confidence, self-esteem and progress.

Student responses clearly demonstrated that they each felt well supported by their tutors, and appeared to be confident that if they needed support they could contact them. This in itself could help develop student resilience and enhance retention on the module, however, Anderson (2006) noted that in order to increase retention, student motivation should be increased through proactive intervention by institutions. He went on to say:

> student self-referral does not work as a mode of promoting persistence…. Effective retention services take the initiative in outreach and timely interventions with those students.

One of the adjustments made on the level 1 module was proactive contact by tutors to students as they started the module, which may have contributed to students feeling well supported.

Students appeared to have somewhat different responses to their assignment feedback from their tutor, but each student had developed a way of managing and using their feedback that worked for them.

At the time of interview these students were three quarters of the way through the module, and had been studying distance learning materials for 6–8 months. At this point in the module it was clear that they had each developed time management strategies that were effective in gaining them high grades in their assessed work.

Students' responses suggested that they felt they had made the right choice in deciding to study K101. This was apparent by the level of encouragement they were prepared to provide to a potential new student on the module. Their responses also suggested that studying on K101 was more manageable than they had initially anticipated and that although they had been stressed before starting the module, in hindsight they felt there was no need to worry. It is suggested that the level of one-to-one tuition offered on K101 mitigated the students' worries, and provided the support necessary to facilitate students' resilience by enabling them to adjust.

Feedback is a key element of online tuition and students on module K101 had been advised by their tutors to use their feedback from one assignment for the preparation of their subsequent assignment, which appeared to provide most students with a level of confidence as they progressed from one assignment to the next. In so doing, they were gradually developing their academic writing skills, a key achievement of study at level 1, which nearly all students reported as stressful, and could be perceived as a form of coping

mechanism in studying at a distance, so that they could persist in their studies, particularly as most didn't feel that they were high performing, successful students.

Morris and Finnegan (2008–2009) highlight the importance of feedback in student retention, and Orsmond, Merry, and Reiling (2000) suggest that feedback is inseparable from the learning process and that successful students show how judicious use of tutors' feedback can enhance and develop learning in highly effective ways. One of the recognised strengths of the delivery of supported distance learning at the OU is the level of feedback provided to students on their assessed work (Gibbs, 2010). The comments provided by tutors are detailed, constructive and balanced with both feedback and feed-forward information provided. It was clear from the students' responses that they viewed the feedback on their assessed work as a resource and an element of support.

Limitations

Several issues arose during this study. We did not meet our target number of interviewees, nor were they from the original target group. The low response rate from students may have been linked to poor timing – because of a delay in the planned recruitment of students, interviews were held just before the exam. It also may be linked to the fact that the students did not know the project team. It is also acknowledged that distance learning students can be overwhelmed in adjusting to the new challenge of studying online, with many competing commitments, so that a request from the project team for input to the study may have been one too many demands on their time. The students were a self-selected group which may not represent the whole student body.

Conclusion

This study focused on the views of students undertaking our gateway level 1 module, in an attempt to ascertain which factors help students to adapt to the challenges of the module and continue with their studies. The findings of our interviews demonstrated that although students had many challenges whilst undertaking the module, they were resourceful in utilising the support the module team provided as well as support from family and friends. Students on the whole were positive about their experience on module K101 and clearly demonstrated their resilience in continuing on the module despite the challenges they faced. The support they received from the university as well as family and friends enhanced their ability to make positive adaptations in the face of the challenges they encountered, and therefore to persist with their studies. Their positive attitude to their experience on the module is reflected in their keenness to encourage prospective students not to stress about studying but to 'just do it'.

Disclosure statement

Notes on contributors

Joan Simons, PhD, is an associate dean for Teaching Excellence in the Faculty of Wellbeing, Education and Language Studies at the Open University. Her Teaching areas include Leadership and Management in Health and Social Care and her research interests include exploring ways to enhance the experience of students studying through distance learning.

Kythe Beaumont is a senior lecturer in the School of Health Well-being and Social Care in the Faculty of Well-being, Education and Language Studies at The Open University. Her main teaching interests are Health and Social Care and her research interests focus largely on teaching and learning at a distance.

Lesley Holland is an educational consultant, and was formerly a senior lecturer in the School of Health Well-being and Social Care in the Faculty of Well-being, Education and Language Studies at The Open University. Her main teaching interests are Health and Social Care and her research interests focus largely on supporting students who are studying through distance learning.

ORCID

Joan Simons 🆔 http://orcid.org/0000-0001-9174-5224

References

Anderson, E. (2006). *Retention for rookies*. Presentation at the National Conference on Student Retention. San Diego.

Bloom, B. S. (Ed.). (1956). *Taxonomy of educational objectives: Handbook 1: Cognitive domain*. New York, NY: David McKay.

Boström, L., & Lassen, L. M. (2006). Unraveling learning, learning styles, learning strategies and metacognition. *Education + Training, 48*(2/3), 178–189.

Bruner, J. (1966). *Towards a theory of instruction*. London: Oxford University Press.

Chetwynd, F. D., & Dobbyn C. H. (2010). Marking guides and feedback – written and oral, Paper presented at the *Annual Conference of the International Society for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*. (ISSOTL). Liverpool, UK

Christie, H., Tett, L., Cree, V.E., Hounsell, J., & McCune, J. (2008). 'A real rollercoaster of confidence and emotions': Learning to be a university student. *Studies in Higher Education, 33*(5), 567–581.

Duncan, N. (2007). 'Feed-forward': Improving students' use of tutors' comments. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education, 32*(3), 271–283.

Ellery, K. (2007). Assessment for learning: A case study using feedback effectively in an essay-style test. *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education, 33*(4), 421–429.

Gibbs, G. (2010). Does assessment in open learning support students? *Open Learning: The Journal of Open Distance, and e-Learning, 25*(2), 163–166.

Goleman, D. (2002). 'Emotional intelligence: Five years later', *New Horizons for learning* [Online], Retrieved January 13, 2017, from www.newhorizons.org

Grant, L., & Kinman, G. (2012). Enhancing well-being in social work students: Building resilience for the next generation. *Social Work Education, 31*(5), 605–621.

Greenberg, M. (2006). Promoting resilience in children and youth: Preventive interventions and their interface with neuroscience. *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences, 1094*(1), 139–150.

Hall, R., & Winn, J. (2010). *The relationships between technology and open education in the development of a resilient higher education*. Open Education Conference, Barcelona, 2010. Retrieved from http://www.icde.org/filestore/Resources/Handbooks/ProceedingsOpenEd2010.pdf

Hart, C. (2012). Factors associated with student persistence in an online program of study: A review of the literature. *Journal of Interactive Online Learning, 11*(1), 19–42.

Harvey, L., Drew, S., & Smith, M. (2006). *The first-year experience: A review of literature for the higher education academy*. York: HEA. Retrieved February 25, 2017, from http://www.improvingthestudentexperience.com/essential-information/undergraduate-literature/first-year-experience/

Hattie, J., & Timperley, H. (2007). The power of feedback. *Review of Educational Research, 77*(1), 81–112.

Holder, B. (2007). An investigation of hope, academics, environment and motivation as predictors of persistence in higher education online progams. *The Internet and Higher Education, 10*, 245–260.

Holling, C. S. (1973). Resilience and stability of ecological systems. *Annual Review Ecology Systems, 4*, 1–23.

Klohen, E. (1996). Conceptual analysis and measurement of the construct of ego resiliency. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 70*(5), 1067–1079.

Knowles, M. (1985). *Andragogy in action*. San Francisco, CA: Josey-Bass.

Luthar, S., & Cicchetti, D. (2000). The construct of resilience: Implications for interventions and social policies. *Development and Psychopathology, 12*(4), 857–885.

Milligan, F. (1995). In defence of Andragogy. *Nurse Education Today, 15*, 22–27.

Moore, A. (2012). *Teaching and learning: Pedagogy, curriculum and culture* (2nd ed.). London: Routledge.

Morris, L. V., & Finnegan, C. L. (2008–2009). Best practices in predicting and encouraging student persistence and achievement online. *Journal of College Student Retention, 10*(1), 55–64.

Orsmond, P., Merry, S., & Reiling, K. (2000). The use of student derived marking criteria in peer and self assessment. *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education, 25*(1), 21–38.

Park, J. H., & Choi, H. J. (2009). Factors influencing adult learners' decision to drop out or persist in online learning. *Educational Technology and Society, 12*(4), 207–217.

Pooley, L., & Cohen, L. (2010). Resilience: A definition in context. *Australian Community Psychologist, 22*(1), 30–37.

Ritchie, J., & Lewis, J. (Eds.). (2003). *Qualitative research practice. A guide for social science students and researchers*. London: Sage.

Sadler, D. R. (2010). Beyond feedback: Developing student capability in complex appraisal. *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education, 35*(5), 535–550.

Simons, J., Murphy, S., & Gill, T. (2017). Exploration of informal withdrawals from K101, *Open University Scholarship Exchange* [Online]. Retrieved November 7, 2017, from https://intranet9.open.ac.uk/collaboration/Scholarship-Exchange/Wiki/Document.aspx?DocumentID=2084

Simpson, O. (2013). Student retention in distance education: Are we failing our students? *Open Learning: The Journal of Open, Distance and e-Learning, 28*(2), 105–119.

Tait, A. (2003). Reflections on student support in open and distance learning. *International Review of Research in Open and Distance Education, 4*(1), 1–9.

Van Breda, A. D. P. (2001). *Resilience theory: A literature review*, Report No: MPI/R/104/12/1/4 [Online]. Retrieved January 15, 2017, from http://vanbreda.org/adrian/resilience/resilience_theory_review.pdf

Weaver, R. (2006). Do students value feedback? Students' perceptions of student written comments. *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education, 31*(3), 379–394.

Weller, M., & Anderson, T. (2013). Digital resilience in higher education. *European Journal of Open, Distance and E-learning, 16*, 1. Retrieved from http://www.eurodl.org/index.php?p=archives&year=2013&&article=559

Willans, J., & Seary, K. (2011). "I feel like I'm being hit from all directions": Enduring the bombardment as a mature-age learner returning to formal learning. *Australian Journal of Adult Learning., 511*, 119–142.

Wojtas, O. (1998). Feedback? No, just give us the answers. *Times Higher Education Supplement.* 25th September. https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/feedback-no-just-give-us-the-answers/109162.article

Xuereb, S. (2015). Academic resourcefulness, coping strategies and doubting in university undergraduates. *Journal of Further and Higher Education, 39*(2), 205–222. doi:10.1080/0309877X.2013.817004

Yorke, M., & Longdon, B. (2008). *The first year experience of higher education in the UK*. (Final Report) [Online]. Retrieved January 21, 2017, from http://www.improvingthestudentexperience.com/library/UG_documents/FYE_in_HE_in_the_UK_FinalReport_Yorke_and_Longden.pdf