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THE EFFECTIVENESS OF EDUCATING COMMUNITY NURSES BY
DISTANCE LEARNING

by

SALLY MARGARET ROLFE LAWTON

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the
requirements of
The Robert Gordon University
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

February 1996

DECLARATION

(a) I declare that the work has been composed by myself.

(b) I declare that all verbatim extracts contained in the thesis have been distinguished by quotation marks and the sources of information specifically acknowledged.

(c) I declare that no material contained in the thesis has been used in any other submission for an academic award.

Signature of Candidate S. Lawton Date 7/2/96

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this thesis is to examine the effectiveness of distance learning within post-registration community nurse education. In this context, 'effectiveness' is defined as being useful to the student or 'fit for purpose' and it focuses on the educational experience. The study, which was designed in two stages, aimed to investigate whether learning support needs were similar for full-time adult students and distance learners.

In the first stage, an original survey instrument was designed and posted to a group of nursing students who had undertaken a diploma-level course (n=169). A response rate of 69% was achieved. It aimed to determine whether the learning and educational support needs were similar between these two groups. The findings suggested that the learning and educational needs were alike and suggested the need for proactive support with adult learners, irrespective of their mode of study.

In the second stage, a phenomenological approach was used to determine the experiences of the first cohort of graduates from a distance-learning degree course in community nursing (n=6); their community supervisors (n=9) and the academic staff involved with the course (n=7). Each group interpreted the meaning of 'effectiveness' in varying ways. The findings confirmed that distance learning is an effective mode of education, providing that the students' learning is facilitated and supported by regular contact with course tutors and other students.

The significance of this study is in the model of supportive learning which was developed in light of the findings that will assist in the effectiveness of distance learning. The model has five elements within it, addressing 'student characteristics', 'tutor characteristics', 'student-student contact', 'course content' and the relationship between the student and tutor. It is proposed that this model could be used for the support of students, as a framework for staff development and for course evaluation.

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GLOSSARY OF TERMS

N.B.S. - The National Board for Nursing, Midwifery and Health Visiting for Scotland

Post-registration - A qualified nurse who has undergone a minimum of three years pre-registration education

P.R.E.P.P. - The Post-registration Education and Practice Proposal document

P.R.E.P. - the Post-registration Education and Practice Report

Project 2000 - The current diploma-level three year pre-registration programme for nursing

R.C.N. - The Royal College of Nursing

U.K.C.C. - The United Kingdom Central Council for Nursing

INTRODUCTION

This thesis is an account of the investigation of the effectiveness of educating post-registration community nurses by distance learning.

With the changing nature of nurse education, particularly in the development of more flexible approaches to education, this thesis offers an opportunity to examine whether distance-learning is an effective way to prepare nurses to gain both an academic and a professional qualification. The study is of interest educationally as little previous work has described the realities of being an adult part-time distance learner either in nursing or higher educational settings.

The contents of the thesis indicate the theoretical underpinnings of the work and a detailed account of the two-stage investigation undertaken. Following an introductory background chapter which establishes the rationale for the study and offers a definition of the term 'effectiveness', three chapters review the literature on the key issues for investigation.

They are :

- adult learning in higher education
- distance-learning within nursing and higher education
- student support within distance learning

This study evolved over a period of five years in parallel with the development and introduction of a distance-learning degree course for community nurses at a new Scottish university. The researcher was closely involved with the course from its development through to its implementation and continues to work as part of the course team. This involvement means the issue of learner support places both professional and intellectual demands on the researcher, as well as demonstrating the interwoven nature of the research and academic work. In respect of the research study, particular attention was paid in the data-gathering phases to the potential for subjective interpretation of the results.

The two-stage research encompassed in this project begins with exploratory fieldwork, leading to the development of quantitative instrumentation via a survey in stage one. This is further deepened by qualitative interviews in stage two. The overall research design is presented in the fifth chapter, with the results and discussion of the two research stages presented in the following four chapters. This is then followed by a comparison of the findings of the two stages.

A theoretical model of supportive learning which was based on the literature review is developed and revised following the analysis of the research findings. It is hoped that the model of supportive learning will provoke discussion about the nature of student support and its place in the provision of distance learning.

It is contended that distance learning is an effective mode of course delivery if the student is supported on an individual basis during the theoretical and practical components of a course. The final section of the thesis draws conclusions and offers some recommendations for future educational practice.

The papers that have been accepted for publication based on the work of this research can be found after the appendices section.

CHAPTER ONE : BACKGROUND TO RESEARCH PROJECT

Introduction

The purpose of this research project is to investigate the effectiveness of educating post-registration community nurses by distance-learning. For the purposes of this research project, community nurses incorporate the following areas of specialism, namely :-

- district nursing
- health visiting
- occupational health nursing

The research is being undertaken at a time of change both in community nursing and within education and recognises this largely unresearched area within nursing and higher education.

Williams (1993) notes the need for nurses to be able to respond to public health needs and changes which hospital-based training schemes have been unable to achieve. This is due to their orientation towards meeting the needs of service, as well as developing the profession itself. A recent Scottish Office Report (1994) agrees that: *'advanced degree or post-graduate level studies would better equip nurses and midwives ... to think critically, to be flexible and analytical, and to research into and improve their practice'*.

This view is also supported by Field (1989) who writes that nurses need to be highly educated in order to cope with the changing care environment. In the United States of America, Alley et al (1992) report that community nursing education needs to be at master's level in order to cope with the complexities of home care. They feel that the challenge for educators is to provide appropriate clinical placements that are relevant to the student's level of experience.

Therefore, in the late 20th century, there appears to be a need to provide flexible programmes of education which will meet rapidly changing health care needs (Dean and Hargreaves 1995).

The start of this research project in 1991 coincided with the UKCC publication of the initial Post Registration Educational Programme Proposal (PREPP), which seemed to indicate a desire to move to common core programmes with specialist elements being built on as well as the suggestion that post-registration community programmes should be offered at degree level.

This is a major change within nursing at national policy level to the structure of the more traditional courses that prepared district nurses, health visitors and occupational health nurses. This gradual move from a service-led training to education in community nursing is discussed in the following section. It shows the influences on the development of education within the three branches of community nursing under discussion in this project.

Influences on the development of community nurse education

The fragmentation within community nurse education was long-standing. A lack of recognition of the demands of district nursing practice and the misunderstanding of the role of the district nurse caused a delay in the development of district nurse education. Kratz (in Allen and Jolley, 1982) argued that it was well into the 1970s before this issue was finally addressed. Thomson (1992) noted that the development of district nurse education needed to be accompanied with integration into higher education to account for the knowledge and widening scope of district nursing practice. Gatley (1992) also saw the need for the district nursing curriculum to provide the foundation for progressive development.

The resulting new curriculum emerged in 1981 addressing district nursing needs based on a nursing philosophy. This new District Nursing syllabus

implemented in 1981 was seen as one of the developing links of nurse education and other health courses offered in higher education settings (Collins, 1985). Although this curriculum aimed to build on existing knowledge gained in the hospital setting, much time was to be spent in the process of adaptation to the community setting and the ability to work independently. The emergence of the more generic courses influenced by PREP has enabled this educational process to continue, while learning alongside other community nurses.

The development of health visiting education began in the later part of the 19th century along with district nursing and occupational health nursing education. Owen (in Allen and Jolley 1982) notes that in 1908, the initial qualifications to enable entry on to a health visiting course included a medical degree. This shows how health visiting was well accepted into higher education from early on in its development, unlike district nurse education.

From 1919, a two-year university-level course became the standard preparation for this role, with the courses being validated by the Ministry of Health. However, by the 1950s the role of the health visitor was less clear and prompted the Jameson Report which set the foundation for modern health visiting according to Owen (in Allen and Jolley, 1982). This Report saw the emergence of the fieldwork teacher, a person who would facilitate the learning of new students in the markedly different world of health visiting. The Practical Work Teacher became the equivalent post in district nursing. By the early 1990s, the titles changed to Community Practice Teacher (CPT) for the two specialities. This role remained undeveloped within occupational health nursing and currently, the future of the CPT remains unclear in the light of the UKCC PREP Report (1994).

The major difference in the role of the district nurse and both the health visitor and occupational health nurse is in the proactive nature of the latter two. Unlike

the district nurse who has referrals made to him/her, the health visitor and occupational health nurse actively seek out health needs.

This has been reflected particularly in the educational provision for health visiting with its emphasis on the social and behavioural sciences. Owen (in Allen and Jolley 1982) argues that this paved the way for degree-level education for nurses.

More recently, with the changes in nurse education resulting from 'Project 2000', it has been proposed by Cernik and Evans (1992) that health visiting needs to be more adaptable and able to meet changing health needs. This, it is suggested is equally applicable to the other community nursing specialities too. Within district nurse and occupational health nursing, there is also a need for qualified practitioners to be able to respond to changing needs of patients, clients and the community in which they practice. This need for change is acknowledged in two recent Reports on the future of nursing, published by the Department of Health (A Vision for the Future 1993 and The Challenges for Nursing and Midwifery 1993).

The formal beginning of occupational health nurse education began in 1934 in collaboration with the University of London and the College of Nursing. The first year-long course only had one student, but served as a major milestone in occupational health nursing education. Following the Dale Report of 1950 which examined industrial health services, Slaney (in Allen and Jolley 1982) notes that the need for occupational health nursing was firmly established and the education of occupational health nurses expanded, further influenced by the Industrial Training Act in 1963.

To accommodate the needs of employed nurses, a day-release course was offered from the mid 1960s. Although it was not until 1970 that it gained professional approval, it demonstrated an innovative and flexible approach to

vocational education. Such innovative approaches to occupational health nursing education continued in the 1980s (Caudwell 1988; Lowis and Ellington 1989). A further innovation in community nurse education occurred in Dundee in the early 1970s when a term of the health visiting course was completed by distance-learning over the course of fifteen months (personal correspondence).

As this brief section has shown these three community nursing specialities were emerging at a similar period in nursing history. However, their developments were totally separated. This has allowed each speciality to develop with a particular identity, but until recently, this separation has overlooked the potential benefits of any common education.

Perhaps professional boundaries were erected due to the slight uncertainty about the various roles of community nurses at a time when registration for nurses at the beginning of the twentieth century was being sought. It could be argued that this historical uncertainty of role may still be evident both within community nursing and primary health settings in the 1990s with the rise of the purchasing of community nursing services and the emergence of marketing strategies in the community specialities (Lawton 1993; RCN 1993).

The publication of the United Kingdom Central Council (UKCC) policy on post-registration education (1994) now recommends the education of community nurses at degree level, giving this academic shift official recognition.

Mckenzie et al (1993) have developed a degree-level course offering post-registration students a dual community qualification. This full-time course exemplifies innovation in nurse education, addressing the rapidly changing nature of community health care. The benefits of joint teaching and learning avoid the professional boundaries that individual courses may inadvertently promote.

The changes in the education of community nurses at post-registration level have been matched by the changes in nurse education overall, with a gradual move to the higher education sector. The move from service-led training to education was only developed widely with Project 2000. Education may include aspects of training within it, but it also encompasses wider aspects. An example would be in the similarities of the role of health education within health promotion. However, there have been claims that Project 2000 does not prepare nurses for their future and is 'crippling the profession' (Friend, 1993). The debate about the need for degree-level education within nursing and the development of degree-level education are presented in the next section.

The move to degree-level education in nursing

The academic shift within nurse education which now involves pre-registration courses is noted as being one of the most significant reforms in nurse education (Vaughan 1994). However, it could be argued that this is not a new phenomenon as in the late 19th century, Mrs Bedford Fenwick advocated continuing education and links to higher education in contrast to the philosophy of the late Victorian time that suggested that too much knowledge would make a 'bad nurse' (Crotty, 1993). Later, in 1930, a proposal was made to integrate nurse education into higher education which was rejected (Allen and Jolley 1982). It is interesting to speculate whether the attitude noted by Crotty above influenced this decision.

A diploma-level course in community nursing was offered by Manchester University in 1959 and an RCN report in 1964 entitled a Reform of Nursing Education acknowledged the suitability of nursing degrees. Writing in 1985, Chapman noted that 'the idea that academic and practical nursing are separate activities is fading'.

The Robbins Report of 1963 considered nursing not to be part of higher education as it had such a practical component and little focus on general

principles (Crotty, 1993). It was the ongoing emergence of nursing degrees by pioneering educationalists that began to change this belief and the development of year-long nurse teacher programmes which addressed curriculum development. However, the concentration on behaviourist educational theory possibly reinforced the training notion. It is only since the 1980's that wider humanistic approaches to curriculum development have occurred (Crotty, 1993).

The centralisation of education occurred following the 1972 Briggs Report of the Committee on Nursing, after wide consultation with professional nursing bodies. This enabled a new national approach to nurse education to emerge from the various national rules and regulations which had applied to pre-registration and post-registration education (Storey, 1985). As with the PREP legislation in 1994, The Briggs Report also acknowledged the need for continuing education following registration.

The introduction of the UKCC as a result of the 1979 Nurses, Midwives and Health Visitor Act determined overall educational policy and allowed a consistency of standards to emerge while facilitating flexibility within educational programmes.

The move towards graduate status within nurse education in the United Kingdom has occurred more rapidly over the past few years. The introduction of the Project 2000 system of pre-registration education has set first-level nurse education within the echelons of higher education, awarding students a Diploma in Higher Education, along with a professional qualification.

For registered nurses, this has led to the development of degree courses which enable them to gain a degree-level qualification as well as a professional qualification within the higher education sector. Dean and Hargreaves (1995)

comment that such a rise in academic level adds credibility to professional status.

The academic shift into higher education and the increase in flexible educational programmes is not only a British phenomenon but is happening in many countries world-wide and in other subjects besides nursing. Garrison (1990) estimated in 1988 that some ten million students were undertaking degree programmes on a distance-learning basis world-wide. The reason for the growth was to enable students to gain access to education when they were not in a position to undertake traditional forms of education.

The reason for this shift to higher-level education in nursing seems to be the need for nurses to develop the transferable skills that higher education offers, namely, improved problem-solving skills, confidence-building, adaptability, the application of theoretical skills to a wide variety of health-related problems and the recognition that training alone cannot provide the depth and breadth of knowledge required by the practising nurse in the 1990's. This view is supported by Chapman (in Allen and Jolley 1982) who wrote that degree-level education enables cognitive development, regardless of the subject studied.

Elkan and Robinson (1993) reflect that one of the reasons for this move to degree level has been the quest for nursing to become a profession in its own right. However, there is a steady stream of criticism of this academic shift in the nursing press, with existing practitioners attacking nursing academics for making nursing pseudo-academic and remote from the patient. Winters (1992) writes that nurse education is based on the view of what nursing 'ought to be' rather than on what it is and, in another article, discusses the negative attitude of 'trained' nurses towards graduates (Winters, 1993). This may be due to the uncertainty of what 'degree level education' is, which is commented on by Clinton (1994).

In response to this criticism, it is suggested by the author that if the contents of degree programmes aim to address relevant issues through careful planning, consultation with clinicians and managers and evaluation, then some of these critics might be reassured.

This pervading culture in nursing which states that higher education is not needed to be a nurse and that the provision of degree level education will exclude those people who would become effective nurses but lack academic skills has been in evidence since 1900 (Burnard and Chapman, 1990).

Another argument has been that graduate nurses were introduced for fast promotion into administrative posts. Burnard and Chapman (1990:137) refute these claims as myths, reporting the research carried out on graduate nurses which demonstrates that 'wastage is low' in comparison to traditionally trained nurses.

Smith's (1993) study of 170 nursing graduates by postal questionnaire (response 67.5%) indicated that two-thirds felt the benefit of obtaining a degree as it enabled them to be analytical, adaptable and also offered research opportunities.

A study carried out by Deback and Mentkowski (1986) investigated whether nursing performance was enhanced by degree preparation. The theoretical framework for this study was based on previous extensive work into nursing competencies by the authors. Competencies were identified by the authors as a wide-ranging set of statements about the professional ability of a nurse. The aim of the study was to analyse the differences in the reporting of competencies by graduates and non-graduates and the study was undertaken with 83 nurses representing three different specialist areas. Thirty eight nurses were educated to non-degree level and the remaining 45 members of the

sample were nursing graduates. The rationale for the number sampled and how the numbers for the interview were decided was not reported.

The three-stage data-gathering process was undertaken by questionnaire and follow-up interviews. Initially, the respondents were asked to describe factors which they felt made nursing either effective or ineffective. This stage included the identification of nurses in their clinical area who were 'outstanding' or 'good'. They were then asked to describe three incidents where they felt they had been effective and another three where they felt that their care was ineffective. This was discussed in a critical incident interview.

The findings were analysed in conjunction with a previously validated competency code-book and then compared to the biographical data provided by the respondents. This enabled the data analysis to be separated from the knowledge about the education and work experience of the respondent.

As with the study undertaken by Smith (1993) described above, the graduate nurses in this study reported more competencies relating to autonomous, reflective and accountable nursing practice. This was not found to be the case for the non-graduates even those respondents who had more than five years of experience. In addition, the non-graduates were less able to make connections between concepts. The authors conclude that the graduate nurses had developed more competencies because of their degree-level education. It could, however, be argued that students would be more familiar with the process of reflection following a degree programme. Although the authors state in their discussion that degree-level nurses held more competencies, this finding was based on self-reporting, rather than by observation. A potential weakness of this study was the lack of evidence of how they carried out their nursing practice.

One cause of the apparent eagerness for higher education is due to the fear of being left behind according to Mangan,(1993), rather than nurses having a real desire for education. This seems to suggest that registered nurses neither want nor need degree level education. Mangan (1993) urges caution in the scramble for any degree, particularly through accreditation of prior learning rather than undertaking a nursing degree. However, there are general transferable skills that are learned through the education process that can be applied to nursing.

In addition Chapman (in Allen and Jolley 1982) noted that the anti-education feeling is due to the lack of opportunities to undertake higher education, suggestive of the need for flexible and accessible higher educational opportunities. The increasing provision of more flexible approaches to education in nursing is presented next.

The development of flexible-learning approaches

Despite the apparent reluctance of some nurses to accept the move towards degree status, the last few years have seen the emergence of many post-registration courses being established to meet the educational needs of qualified nurses. This has, in part, led to the emergence of part-time and distance-learning courses. Part-time education was first addressed in 1970 with the introduction of education for mature nurses, according to Allen and Jolley (1982), so as with the flexible course delivery within occupational health nursing mentioned earlier, this was not a totally new approach.

One such flexible approach to education is distance-learning. As distance-learning is still a relatively new phenomenon within nurse education, an initial literature search on the use of distance-learning within vocational settings was undertaken. It soon became apparent, even at the initial stage of investigation, that there were many similarities between full-time and distance-learning approaches to tertiary-level education for adult students.

The similarities are :

- the time available to students to complete their studies
- the quality of material offered to students
- the learning needs of adults
- the support that such students require during periods of theory and practice.

The main differences are the amount of time that students actually sit in the classroom having lectures and the time available to them on campus to use the library facilities and network with other students and course tutors.

Additionally, the use of the lecturer's time appears to be very different within a distance-learning course, with the emphasis being on preparing written distance-learning materials and individually supporting students while they complete the self-study phase of their course.

It has been this increasing awareness of these various differences on the part of the author that led to the development of the current research project.

Aims of the research project

This research project set out to investigate the effectiveness of educating community nurses by distance-learning. The aims of the research project are arranged in two stages. The first stage aims to: -

- identify the educational and support needs of post-registration community nurses in the specialist areas of district nursing, health visiting and occupational health nursing
- develop both formative and summative evaluation of a distance-learning course designed and offered for the above areas of specialism

The second stage aims to:

- determine the special demands of the distance-learning students of educational aids such as the mentor in the listed areas of specialism

- theorise the qualities and predict the role of the community nurse mentor with respect to a distance-learning community nursing course
- identify the special educational/orientational needs of the community nurse mentor
- critically evaluate the effectiveness of the proposed system of mentorship within a distance-learning community nursing course.

However, the definition of how the term 'effectiveness' is used in this research project is fundamental and is explained in the following section.

The definition of effectiveness in this research project and its implications for the design of the project

The term 'effective' may be an ambiguous term in education, depending on the role of the person using it, so it is important to define it in relation to this research project. Brown agrees with this view (1993) when pointing out that the notion of effectiveness is dependent upon the role and function of the person making the judgement.

From the educational institution's perspective, effectiveness is often linked to quality. Before the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act, Her Majesty's Inspectorate had the duty of monitoring polytechnics and colleges of higher education. Effectiveness and quality were linked together in this exercise (Melia, 1994). However, Brown (1993) argues that effectiveness within an institutional context may also be closely associated with efficiency and the drive to save extraneous costs. This may lead to increased student numbers without the associated rise in resources which, in Brown's view, will not enhance the effectiveness of the educational experience. As distance education programmes continue to develop, the 'quality' of the course may be enhanced by the provision of tutorial support for the student. This view is supported by Simpson (1992).

A course may be deemed as effective if it has a high completion rate and a low drop-out rate, although this concentrates on the quantity of students who complete the course rather than the quality of the educational experience. This focus is criticised by McPherson et al (1994) when they state that this concentration on 'end-products' may mean a loss of the recognition of student needs. Billings (1988) makes the assumption that there are close links between the drop-out phenomenon in both full-time higher education and within distance education when students may feel isolated and unsupported.

From the tutor's perspective, a course may be seen as effective if the students are challenged but not overwhelmed by the course and are presented with relevant material and assessment strategies. This is similar to the view of effectiveness proposed by the Enterprise in Higher Education Initiative who aim to develop students *with social and intellectual skills through project work and work experience* (Brown,1993:230). While there is concern about the completion rates, there is a focus on the standards of the course and the quality of the experience. Pechs and Wallace (1993) noted that the course team's responsiveness to students' needs and their effectiveness in assisting in the understanding of course content is a way of ensuring a high standard of education. Lentell (1995) identifies effective learning as a process of transfer and application.

In an evaluative study undertaken by Davies (1995), it is proposed that effective learning can be achieved by addressing the expectations of the student. This has relevance to distance learning which may be an unfamiliar educational approach to many students at the beginning of such a course.

Effectiveness to a student is a much more personal concern. The relevance of material, the access to resources and the ability to complete a course are of prime concern, especially if the student is self-funding. Jeeawoody (1988) supports this view, adding that the student needs to understand how distance-

learning is structured to assist in its effectiveness. The emergence of the self-funded post-registration student may exclude many potential community nurses for economic reasons.

Additionally, the social dimension of meeting fellow students and networking is important too. McPherson et al (1994:121) wrote: *'Effectiveness in students' terms encompassed everything from the short-term application of their learning in relationships and contexts outside the course to the longer-term co-ordination of their personal, academic and professional lives'*

This shows the complex nature of the term 'effectiveness'. Therefore, in the context of this research project, effectiveness is defined as **the usefulness of the course to the student** i.e. its fitness for the purpose and the recognition of the needs of students as they undertake a distance-learning course.

This 'fitness for purpose' notion is closely allied to the concept of quality. This is another term that has varying interpretations. The original links between fitness for purpose and quality were made in industry in the 1960s (Attree 1993) and suggests that in an educational programme, there must be 'utility', both for the students, health care and ultimately, for patient care. Having established a working definition of the term 'effectiveness' in this research project, it is important to raise the ethical implications of investigating such a concept as it has been defined.

Graziano and Raulin (1993) assert that there may be an ethical dilemma in the discussion of the effectiveness of an educational programme, especially if students are involved in the research. This is because of the potential for personal intrusion into the student's private world. It could be argued that the student who is unable, for whatever reason, to enter full-time education has little choice if they want to pursue academic study. A particular course may be enrolled upon because no other course is available and the author is aware of

the potential for harm in asking current and former students to participate in a study. This recognition is reflected in the design of the study, as the first stage of the research involved the completion of an anonymous postal questionnaire. The accompanying letter informed the potential respondent of the exact purpose of the study and this enabled them to choose whether to complete the questionnaire or not. This notion of informed consent was applied in both stages of the study.

Furthermore, the graduates who were interviewed in the second stage were asked whether they would be willing to participate in the study following the completion of their course, so that there would be no potential effect on their outcome of study.

The potential for bias is also identified at the beginning of the study. The participants had all been associated with a particular academic department and there could be the potential for answers to be given so that the courses were seen in a good light. Additionally, as the researcher is also involved in the course development and teaching, it could be possible that the course is shown in a positive way as Graziano and Raulin (1993:298) note: *'A staff is generally interested in showing the program in its best possible light, not only because it is theirs, but because a program that appears to be ineffective might not get continued funding'*.

Although the course in question may not be directly affected by the funding issue as it is a full cost course, the reputation of the course may have suffered if it was known to be ineffective. Additionally, as distance-learning is a move away from the traditional delivery of courses, it could be that the new course had to be seen to be effective.

To reduce the chance of this, the data that were gathered and analysed during the study have been reported as objectively as possible, showing both the

strengths and the weaknesses of distance and full-time modes of course delivery. The importance of this study would appear to be in the development of strategies to enhance and evaluate the effectiveness of a distance-learning course by responding to the needs of the students and the profession.

Summary

This introductory chapter has shown the changes in nurse education which have been influenced by professional developments and recent changes in the provision of health-care. This means that community nurse education has to respond to such rapid change through flexible educational programmes at degree level. The importance of flexible and quality education is recognised by the Department of Health (1993).

The chapter discussed the development of health visiting, district nursing and occupational health nurse education from three separated specialities to the more generic-based courses of the 1990s. This has occurred during a time of greater flexibility within higher education and the development of part-time and distance-learning approaches to course delivery.

In addition to the aims of the research project, a definition of the term effectiveness has been made. For the purposes of this research project, it has been defined as the usefulness of the course to a student or its 'fitness for purpose'.

The importance of recognising adult learning needs and support for students as well as investigating the provision of distance-learning within nurse education have been identified as relevant to the preliminary literature review. These three areas are now presented in the following chapters.

CHAPTER TWO : A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE ON ADULT LEARNING

Introduction

This chapter reviews the literature relating to adults undertaking higher educational courses and discusses the recent research findings that have been influential in the topic of how adults may approach learning. It demonstrates the difficulty that some adult learners have when entering higher education for the first time, and suggests the need for structured support during a course. Throughout the chapter, the issues being discussed are applied specifically to nurse education.

Initially, an attempt is made to define the term 'adult learner'. This is followed by a discussion of the reasons why adults enter higher education. Then, the factors influencing adult learning and the responses of academics to such student concerns are discussed. Finally, the implications for educators working with adult learners are noted.

A definition of adult learners

Adulthood has been defined as the period in human life from 18 years until death. However, within higher education, it is a term that implies a person who has had a break in-between leaving school and entering higher education. McGivney (1993:12) classes adult students as :-*'people over twenty who had been out of full-time education for at least two years'*. Therefore, the adult learner is a broad term used to refer to people in this category and applies to the students and graduates who participated in this research project. It recognises that students within community nurse education may have been away from full-time education for some time.

The growth of adult learners in recent years has resulted in one fifth of all students undertaking degree studies in the United Kingdom being aged over

twenty-one(Richardson 1994). It will be noticed that Richardson's definition of adults is referred to as those students over 21.

The education of adults is a challenge for the tutor. On the positive side, Lovell (1980) identified adulthood as an exploratory phase when the vast amount of learning that occurred in childhood can be implemented and applied over a long period of time. This implies that the adult learner is able to accommodate new concepts and apply them into their existing knowledge. This is particularly relevant to community nursing practice which is studied following a period of consolidation following first level training. However, this concept of adulthood being a period of growth and development is less than a century old according to Hayes(1990) who points out that previously, adulthood had been seen, at best, as a period of stagnation or even decline to illustrate the negative attitude to adult learning. It could be argued that many adult students would agree with this notion. This attitude may well prevent adults becoming learners in the formal sense. The next section explores the motivation of adult learners.

The motivation of adults in higher education

Wagner (1990) writes about the reasons why adults enter higher education proposing that the main reason is to enhance their potential in their careers which she terms as being an 'instrumental reason'. This has relevance to community nursing education which is undertaken in order to obtain a professional qualification.

Taylor developed a matrix which identified the reasons why students attended the University of Surrey (Taylor et al 1981). The four categories identified were related to vocational, academic, personal and social orientations. Three sub-orientations were then explored relating to the intrinsic or extrinsic reasons why a person may engage in learning; the aim of their reason for enrolling and the main area of concern whilst on the course.

A comparison is made between the intrinsic and extrinsic factors within the vocational orientation by Strang (1987) with technician students. The vocational intrinsic orientation was equated with the notion that the course would aid job performance and understanding. This is similar to the aims of the PREP document (UKCC 1994) which promotes the concept of continuing professional development. Conversely, the vocational extrinsic orientation was equated with the notion of requiring a licence to practice. This is similar to nurse education, as such 'licences' are requirements for nursing practice.

The difference between the intrinsic and extrinsic categories is the degree of choice that appears to be associated with the former and the obligatory nature of the latter although within nursing, PREP will be a requirement for re-registration. In Strang's small study, the students in the vocational intrinsic category performed higher in their coursework than those students in the extrinsic category suggesting that undertaking a course voluntarily may be more motivating than being sent.

McGivney (1993) disagrees with Wagner's contention that people enter higher education for instrumental reasons saying that this may be the justification to others for entering a programme, but not necessarily the real reason. McGivney (1993:24) contends that more people are entering educational programmes for their own personal reasons .

This personal development is also reflected in the number of adult students who invest time and considerable amounts of money in their education. This might be a cause of motivation in itself as they might feel more 'ownership' of a course that is being self-funded. It also puts a responsibility on the educator to offer an education that is worthy of such investment.

However, the notion of instrumental reasons and the quest for knowledge being the main motivating force is supported in a study carried out in a distance

learning course in Utah where 15 adult learners were studied to identify variables which might affect their learning (Fellenz et al 1987). The method used was interview and categories were identified from the responses. It was reported that the '*motivation and specific goal sets of the learners had a very significant impact on the learning that had occurred*'. Many students reported that they had a quest for knowledge which would assist them in their work situation. It is argued in this paper that '*moving the instructional delivery beyond the knowledge level to application, synthesis or evaluation stimulated their learning*', although this statement is not reinforced by the findings in the study. The findings indicate that there were perceived differences within the students of what the terms 'learning' and 'knowledge' actually meant to them and whether these concepts changed during the course. However, it is noted that the students were so concerned with the final acquisition of the certificate that it became difficult to separate the learning from the requirements of the course.

In a similar vein, the effects of the motivation of the adult learner and the learner's goal can act as either a positive or negative influence on the learning outcome behaviour of the adult according to Gibson and Graf (1992). A positive influence (or positive vector as it is described) is exemplified by the successful completion of a course, whereas coursework failure, or feelings of isolation could be seen as negative vectors. However, the high motivation of the adult learner may act as a 'double-edged sword' for some as their feelings of uncertainty at the start of the course may lead to them becoming motivated by the fear of failure (Biggs 1987). This statement would appear to apply in both full-time and distance-learning settings, especially where students are paying for their own fees. As Eason and Corbett note (1991) '*time is money and students expect value for money*'. It supports the notions of 'effectiveness' as perceived by a student as mentioned in the first chapter. If the quality of a course is poor, then it may affect the motivation and satisfaction of the student, especially if they have uncertainties about their own abilities.

Researchers have, in their quest to find out about the nature of adult learning, studied the two variables that might affect academic success within students. They are the prediction of academic success and the self-confidence of learners. These issues are addressed in the next section of this chapter.

The main concerns of adult learners

Bernt and Bugbee (1993) identify the adult learner as someone who has possibly been away from formal education for some time. They found that recent educational experience enhanced the chances of success. They carried out research on a group of adult distance learners (n=183) with 72% of the sample being male. Three sub-groups were identified in the sample as follows:-

- high passers who obtained 90% pass rates in any examinations taken
- low passers who obtained 70-75% pass-rates in any of the examinations they took (the pass rate was 70%)
- failures who had not passed up to 4 examinations they had taken

They found that the high passers were more likely to have already acquired an advanced degree and the low passers were more likely to lack an undergraduate degree. A questionnaire was devised, concentrating on the following six areas: active learning, diligence, test strategies, time-management, concentration and positive attitudes towards learning. A response rate of 66% overall was achieved after a follow-up mailing. The authors acknowledge the potential limitations of self-reporting. The results suggested that those students who did not have previous college experience who enrolled in a distance education programme were *'at-risk primarily because they lack metacognitive skills for approaching course-work and examination-taking. These students may need more structure and direction than more experienced, self-directed learners'* (Bernt and Bugbee 1993:108).

This, it could be argued, means that the student who has been away from education for some time needs to be shown how to learn effectively, rather than

what to learn, which is what the student may be expecting. It is possibly unsurprising that recent academic experience enhanced results in the study undertaken by Bernt and Bugbee above, as the students who had recent experience of education would have an understanding of a higher educational setting. However, the role of the tutor is to help in the orientation of such inexperienced students into higher education.

Perhaps, some students who leave a course because of coursework failure do so because of a lack of appropriateness in their approach to course-work rather than because of a lack of intellectual ability. The first phase of a course would seem to be crucial for such vulnerable students if the demotivating effect that failing coursework may have are considered.

Valcke et al (1991) distinguish such concepts of prediction as problem-centred or content-centred. They refer to the relevance of specific student variables which they list as:

- students at the beginning of a course
- undeveloped study skills
- age
- gender
- educational background and experience

This final element, educational background and experience, is reported by Valcke et al (1991) to have the '*highest percentage of student variance in study success*'.

A study carried out at Massey University in New Zealand also claims that student outcome is linked to previous educational experience. Approximately 40% of the sample (n=601) undertaking a business management distance-learning course who had previous qualifications obtained either an A or B grade in comparison to the 25% who did not have any qualifications. However, this study also shows that while 39% of students who were not qualified did not complete the course, those non-completers who were in possession of a

qualification amounted to 34% (Sligo 1991). This interesting finding is not commented on by the author and perhaps demonstrates the variation in the meaning of the term 'success'.

However, different findings are made by Powell et al (1990) in terms of the age and educational level of the student having a significant influence on academic success. Powell et al (1990) used discriminant analysis which found 9 factors significant to the success of students within a distance learning course at Athabasca University in Canada. Predisposing and institutional factors, were more significant in predicting academic success. The predisposing characteristics included the preparation of the student, their motivation and demographic factors; the institutional characteristics related to the quality and difficulty of course material, as well as the administration of the course. The study was carried out on a sample of 301 newly-enrolled students over the age of 18 years with success being measured on the completion of the first course undertaken. As the authors note, this is a rather limited definition of success. Fifteen variables were identified for analysis, with 9 being found to be most significant . They included issues such as :

- persistence
- marital status
- the need for success
- need of support
- students' literary score
- financial stability
- study habits
- gender
- subjective rating of previous educational preparation

It could be pointed out that these categories relate to 'stability' and the student who is committed , focused and well-motivated.

Sixty-eight percent of cases were classified correctly according to the above factors as to whether the first course was passed or a student failed/withdrew from the course. Those students who were female and/or married were found to

be more likely to succeed. The factors that were found not to be significant include those shown below :

- Attitude towards studying
- Current Educational Level
- Educational Commitment
- Level of Support
- Number of children
- Age of the student

They found that educational level at entry was insignificant in contrast to the studies undertaken by Valcke (1991) and Sligo (1991) mentioned earlier. Within this paper, there is no distinction between the category termed 'level of support' within the insignificant factors and the 'need for support' identified as being significant, which is slightly confusing for the reader, as there is no identification as to whether the students were more likely to succeed if they did not need support.

Marital status is reported as being significant in a study carried out by Dille and Mezack (1991) who also investigated how to predict high-risk students undertaking a telecourse in a community college. In a sample of 151 telecourse students, studied over the period of one semester, they found that 80.5% of married students were successful in comparison to 62.1% of single students and 54.5% of divorced students. Dille and Mezack (1991) also report that the older the student was, the more likely they were to succeed, agreeing with the findings of Powell et al. However, unlike Powell et al's study, gender is not deemed to be a significant factor in predicting success. This seems to indicate that each student needs to be supported on an individual basis. It could also be argued that students with few post-secondary qualifications need to have more guidance in the development of their academic and transferable skills in order to develop self-confidence in own abilities. The issue of the lack of self-confidence in the adult learner is discussed further in the following section.

Expectations of higher education and the lack of self-confidence in the adult learner

Smithers and Griffin (1986) identify that adult students with no academic qualifications base their expectations of higher education (and in particular university) on hearsay. This may cause problems if the experience does not live up to the expectation. The relevance of this to nursing education is the change in the educational approach that the adult student must face both in entering higher education and in coping with a course offered by a more flexible approach as with distance learning.

If their previous education was not a positive experience, the transition into higher education may be difficult and very challenging for them. Such a potentially negative experience may influence their perceived self-ability in the adult learning environment. This is also confirmed by Rogers (1989) who says that learners often come into higher educational settings with pre-conceived ideas about what it will be like. McGivney (1993:21) reports that '*primary and secondary data reveal that a disturbingly large proportion of the public has a stereotyped view of learning dating from school experience. Many believe that all forms of post-compulsory education are formal, inflexible and examination-orientated, and that participants will be judged on their ability to meet certain standards. This perception undoubtedly has a powerful deterrent effect*'.

There may be a fundamental lack of self-confidence within adults who may rely on their school or other academic experience to be an accurate guide to their learning ability, especially in the realms of higher education. Rogers (1989) confirms this view pointing out that many adult learners regard real education as something distant and separate.

The work of Rogers (1978) summarises the notion of the power and influence that education has, especially through the control of the educational experience by the teaching staff. In such a climate, there is neither trust nor the ability for

the learner to develop and grow. When Roger's work was first published in 1940, it was exceptionally controversial as it challenged the existing power-base of psychotherapy. Rogers also argued that it applied equally to education (1978). If this argument is accepted, then it is little wonder that students have little experience of active participation in the learning experience.

Informal learning may well occur through experience as well as through formal education. As Lovell (1980) states, the student discounts their own previous informal learning as irrelevant and not able to be classified as real learning. Many adult students on courses report feeling unsure of their studying ability, especially if they have not been in a formal learning situation for a long time. They discount their informal learning as irrelevant and are surprised to be assured that in many areas, they have more knowledge and skill than the lecturing staff. As Rogers notes (1989) adult learners are fearful that they might make themselves appear foolish if they appear to lack knowledge or fail some of the course-work.

This anxiety that some adult learners experience was examined by Rogers (1978) who determined that it caused conflict within the student. This is because the need to learn new things might lead the individual to question their present worth based on their existing knowledge. Thus the positive aspect of acquiring new knowledge becomes a potential threat. Mezirow (1978) termed this conflict as being a 'disorientating dilemma' according to Hayes (1990) and one that leads the learner into a transformation stage when it is realised that previously held views are no longer secure. It would seem imperative from this that the self-image of the student during this transformation is maintained by academic staff to prevent the student from dropping-out of their chosen educational programme.

This is confirmed by Marnell and Blanche (1990), who carried out a pre-study induction course where 55 adult students were asked to rate their anxiety

levels at the thought of returning to study before and after the induction course. The result was that there was an increase in the number of people who identified themselves as being anxious after the induction course (from 8 to 17) and a reduction in the number of people who identified themselves as being only a little anxious (from 31 to 25). This suggests that the inclusion of anxiety rates in such an induction course may lead some confident students to think that perhaps they should be anxious. The authors of the study comment on this issue arguing that one of their objectives was to address anxieties rather than remove them, so that such a finding was almost to be welcomed. Richardson (1994) contends that the lack of self-confidence in adult learners is not confirmed in the research findings about success in higher education. However, it appears to be a widely-held belief within adult learners themselves. This suggests that success may mean more than passing a course. It also relates to the educational experience and exemplifies the use of the term 'effectiveness' in this project.

Thyer and Bazeley (1993) in a study identifying possible stressors for nurses undertaking nurse education programmes note that most students are anxious about the amount and type of academic work that they are expected to undertake, supporting the notion of the expectations that some students may have about higher education itself. It seems imperative to allay such fears at the beginning of a course in a proactive way, rather than having to deal with a problem at a later stage in a course. Similarly, in the study on the progress of mature students in higher education, carried out by Smithers and Griffin (1986) 40% of the sample reported having problems with writing ability.

In a study of the uses of an academic study assistance unit by 150 students, 62% asked for help in improving studying and writing skills whereas only 27% wanted someone to talk to (Wankowski 1991).

Beaty and Morgan (1992) carried out a longitudinal study of 18 Open University students over 6 years to examine the changes in their individual approaches to

learning. They found that most students had little confidence in their abilities at the start, with the actual application process being seen as a great step in itself. However, their self-confidence began to grow as they became more familiar with the system and their own skills of study organisation. The authors of the study propose that the confidence factor is the prerequisite required for effective study which Beaty and Morgan describe as 'competence'. Once this is achieved, the learner is in a position to take more control of their learning themselves, rather than relying on the system to tell them what they should learn. This is akin to the move from being a passive learner to an active one. As Lawson pointed out (1979) there is an ethical responsibility placed on the academic staff during this process as the student may well become different due to the development of these transferable skills and may need support during this process of change, however slight it may be.

The importance of the developing of self confidence is shared by Taylor (1985) who undertook a longitudinal study of 29 Open University students, finding that they spent the first year of their particular course learning how to study and become selective in terms of their developing metacognitive skills. She reported that the biggest change within the student was in the increased feelings of self-confidence and self concept and the transferable nature of such confidence to other areas of the student's life.

In addition, Abouserie (1994) investigated sources of stress in university students and found that there was a gender difference. The sample consisted of 675 students (202 males and 473 females), although their age range and mode of study was not reported. The results of a questionnaire indicated that the female students had significantly higher life stress scores than their male colleagues. Unfortunately, the method of data analysis was not reported. Additionally, this study showed that female students were more stressed overall and that students ~~with~~ with an internal locus of control appeared to be less stressed. The relevance of this study to distance-learning is that the vast majority of the

students are women; they are also undertaking part-time study and therefore adding another element into their lives. This means that guidance and support is needed to help them cope with the demands of such a complex life.

The responses to adult learners by academic staff

The involvement of academic staff in the learning experiences of adult students has focused on the learning styles of students e.g. the Lancaster inventory developed by Entwistle (1988). This influential work during the 1970s and 1980s looked at the way individual students approached learning, identifying differences between surface, deep and strategic approaches to learning as well as various styles of learning. However Christensen et al (1991) describe how there is disagreement as to whether the task at hand influences the learner or whether the learner influences the adopted style.

Therefore, it might follow, that if a student cannot adapt to the educational system, then they drop-out or feel dissatisfied with their education. It is proposed that the sense of involvement that a tutor develops with students may influence their learning experience. Bevis (in Watson 1989) argues for educators to move alongside their students to enable learning to occur, rather than centrally controlling it. This is supportive of the author's view that the process of learning and development are as important as the final outcome.

Bevis would contend that the teacher can enhance the learning process by posing questions, which is an approach well-suited to distance-learning.

Gibson and Graf (1992) refer to the Boshier Congruence Model of Educational Participation and Drop-out which is influenced by intrapersonal factors and external variables. Boshier notes that people are less likely to drop-out if they have a sense of direction and are open to new experiences. There is more likelihood of students dropping-out if they are very unhappy within the educational environment. Based on the work of Boshier, the Chain of Response

Model was developed which looked at three categories that may impede educational development at the start of a course and at selected intervals during it (Gibson and Graf 1992). The three categories were:

- *Situational* - identified as problems arising within the personal circumstances of the student.
- *Institutional* - identified as course-related issues such as time-tabling of classes that may prevent the student attending.
- *Dispositional* - identified as the view that the student has of their own abilities.

Gibson and Graf (1992) then applied these three factors to a random stratified sample of 210 graduates and non-completers in an extended degree programme in Wisconsin, to see if these three categories affected the completion rates of students. The students who completed their studies had an aim on enrolment and recent college experience. In contrast, the non-completers had little self-belief, a lack of motivation and a poor study discipline. These findings do support Bernt and Bugbees' findings mentioned earlier, but not the findings of Powell et al's study (1990) with regard to recent college experience and motivation being significant in the completion of an academic course. Gibson and Graf interpret their findings as indicating the need for guidance and direction for students early on in a course. They also said that '*study skills coursework to strengthen both confidence and competence to successfully engage in distance learning seem indicated*' (Gibson and Graf 1992:49).

Tinto developed a model used in full-time higher educational settings in the 1970s which was called the 'Model of Persistence and Withdrawal' in higher education (Bernard and Amundsen 1989). Tinto viewed the potential for withdrawal to be connected to multi-factorial issues relating to personal issues, academic results and academic integration with both peers and academic staff. Research carried out to validate this theory cited by Bernard and Amundsen (1989:29) was summarised by saying that '*The variable designated as*

frequency of contact with faculty made the largest, unique contribution to the prediction of persistence status'.

Bernard and Amundsen (1989) adapted the Tinto model in their study of 553 students undertaking a range of distance learning courses specialising in subjects relating to banking. Their results suggest that the Tinto model is useful in explaining why people drop-out of distance education programmes, but qualified this by outlining that there are differing reasons for the lack of completion depending on the type of course undertaken. There is a quality issue to be considered too with Bernard and Amundsen (1989:44) saying '*At stake ultimately, in questions arising from student attrition, is the issue of instructional quality and the learning that results from it'.*

Another enquiry by academic staff to adult learners was to determine any major differences between full-time and distance learning students. Köymen (1992) compared 329 full-time students and 375 Open University students using the Learning and Study Inventory to examine attitude, motivation, anxiety, time management, concentration, information processing, selecting main ideas, study aids, self-testing and test strategies. The results indicated that there were only moderate differences between the two groups of students. In both groups, students lacked confidence in their abilities, however, distance learners had higher scores in the study aids section, due, (according to the author), to the in-built techniques within the distance material that enhanced learning.

As Darbyshire points out (1993), in full-time courses within higher education, large numbers of students are gathered together and lectured 'at' with no opportunity for interaction or discussion. For many full-time university students, this will be familiar. The ability of the lecturer is very important in this situation and this can range from the dictation of notes with no thinking occurring (in either the lecturer or the student) to the inspirational performance from a lecturer who is able to relate their knowledge to the world of the student. Mager

(1990:41), writing about learning laments that *'exhortation is used more and accomplishes less than any other behaviour-changing tool known to man'*.

In a descriptive paper written by Jevons (1979) outlining a dual-mode university course written for both on-campus and off-campus students, it emerged that the off-campus students did slightly better than the on-campus students (although figures did not accompany the paper). The reason for this, argued Jevons, the author, was that the off-campus students had the materials for longer and the on-campus students felt discontented at not having more than 2 hours of classes scheduled per week. Jevons(1979:8) referred to this as *'a disappointed expectation (by the on-campus students) of a greater measure of spoon-feeding'*.

Kahl and Cropley (1986) report a comparative study of traditional and distance learning courses, outlining the differences between the two modes of study. It showed that the distance learners felt less certain of their abilities to complete a course as well as feeling more isolation from other students.

The authors proposed that distance-learning courses should have more input relating to the development of the metacognitive skills. This proposition is supported by Coats (1991) who argues that students have to be shown how to develop their own learning processes. Beaty and Morgan (1992) report that metacognitive skill development would appear to apply in any educational setting.

In addition, Fellenz (1989:100) discusses that *'courses directed to the improvement of learning skills have tended to move from the teaching of time-honoured, recommended practices in note-taking, time management and similar study skills to attempt to educate students in cognitive psychology and to develop personal metacognitive and memory strategies'*. This may promote

the flexibility within the learning environment that was mentioned in the first chapter.

Having considered the nature of adult learning, motivation, predicting academic success and the lack of self-confidence that may be present in adult learners, attention will now be focused on the implications of having adult learners within the higher education sector.

The implications for educators working with adults

According to Marland (1989), there has been a move away from the process-product paradigm within educational research to a more mediating process which focuses more on the students' experience of learning. This challenges the notion of learning concentrating on the acquisition of factual knowledge. Raaheim et al (1991:157) write that education is much more than the transmission of knowledge when stating: *'education is unavoidably and desirably a personal process; that is to say, it is a matter of interaction between individuals and it is a matter of each assisting the development of the other, although the greater responsibility of this naturally rests with the teacher.*In addition, they make the important point that *'student learning needs to be planned for'.*

Bhola (1989) comments that much work has been done over the last sixty years examining the processes whereby adults learn, focusing on learning theory, perception theory and the theory of motivation. Squires (1995) proposes a general model that is concerned with the fundamentals of courses. It concentrates on the whole educational process, rather than merely the content. This process may have to be illustrated for the student too and may be a challenge for the educator. This notion of the educational process may not be well-organised according to Hayes(1990).

Time may not be spent by the adult in the re-organisation of the cognitive schemata to accommodate the new information. Hayes goes as far as saying that because of this lack of processing, informal learning acquired through life experience may, in fact hinder learning, whereas many other writers see it as a foundation upon which to build. This is particularly relevant to nursing as a nurse has to continually adapt his/her knowledge to different clinical situations. However, as previously noted, it may be somewhat harder to adapt to a new educational system, as well as combining this with distance learning. To ensure that this transition is made as straightforward as possible, the information presented to the adult learner has to be as meaningful as possible.

Biggs (1994) re-addresses the traditional nature of education as the acquisition and repetition of facts which he identifies as the quantitative approach to education. In contrast, the qualitative approach focuses on meaningful learning with the teaching element assisting the learner to cope with the challenges that this may present.

Within nurse education, Murray (in Watson 1989:199) writes that '*meaningful learning experiences shape a student's learning and education*'. Biggs (1994) further notes the need for a developmental approach to help with student progression, adding support to the aims of this research project.

The move towards meaningful learning has major implications for the teaching of adults. If the information can be related in any way to the adult's existing knowledge, then there is more chance of learning occurring. In the design of the distance learning material, it is essential to follow this approach to facilitate learning.

Knox (1978) agreed with this point when he described a system whereby the personal learning styles and characteristics of an individual are assessed, with a supportive plan devised so that more effective learning strategies can be

used by the student in the development of meaningful learning. However, within an educational framework where there is no support or guidance for such amendments to an individual's learning style, there would seem to be little point in attempting this.

Knox(1978) continued this argument by promoting the facilitative nature of the teaching of adults in order for the adult student to develop effective learning strategies within themselves. This implies that the teacher in adult education has to try and relate as much as possible to a student's previous experience. Biggs (1987) developed a model of study behaviours based on three stages which are:

- the personal structure that the student brings with them to a course and the structure of the course itself (termed presage)
- the perception of the academic environment (the process)
- the outcome of the course (the performance).

The learning style that was adopted by over 800 students in higher education was then examined to see whether it was surface or deep. The surface approach is characterised by the student who places great emphasis on task completion without seeing how it fits into the course as a whole and is unable to relate it to their own experience. There is also a reliance on rote learning. In comparison, the students who adopt a deep learning approach see the relevance of the academic task to their course and could apply knowledge from their own experience to it. The usefulness of identifying the student's preferred studying style according to Biggs is in order for the student to be realistically aware of their cognitive resources to plan, monitor and control their style in face of task demands. Biggs calls this meta-learning and regards it as a skill that can develop within the student. Such identification can also be used to assess the type of support that a student may need. Pask (1976) describes learners as either being serialists, (i.e. those people who learn by taking pieces of information and building up a whole picture) or holists, (who tend to look at

the overall picture and then add the detail). He demonstrated how mismatching could occur between a student and teacher if they belonged to different categories. Pask (1976:16) pointed out that *'transferability is the key to learning....suggesting that ability may not be developmental but more closely associated with teaching and learning styles'*.

There has been some controversy as to the differences between how children and adults learn. Within the 'Characteristics of Adults as Learners Model' developed by Cross (1981) (Hough 1984; Bhola,1989),the differences between adults and children as learners are shown to be *'essentially ..in terms of personal and situational variables. Education of children is compulsory, formal and standardised. Adult learning is voluntary, episodic and intentional '* (Bhola 1989:48).

A typology of specific adult learning theory comprises of three categories,(Bhola 1989),which are defined as life situations, theories of consciousness and learner characteristics.

Within the category relating to learner characteristics, Knowles has been at the forefront of the writing relating to adult learning, identifying the term andragogy. Writing in 1970, and still influential in the 1990s, he identified certain characteristics of the pedagogical approach that are associated with the traditional face-to-face model of learning and teaching. The five assumptions identified below form the extreme pedagogical view. They are:

- The learner is a passive recipient of knowledge.
- The teacher's previous knowledge and experience is more important than the students'.
- Age determines how ready a student is to learn what they are told to learn.
- Learning particular subjects is related to a set of prescribed limits on content.
- Motivation is an external force.

These are contrasted with the five andragogical characteristics as follows:

- The learner is self-directing and an active partner in learning.
- Experience is vital to the learning process.
- The individual feels the need to learn when they are searching for new information.
- The individual is highly motivated.
- They approach learning to further themselves.

Knowles has been criticised for this theory by writers such as Hayes(1990) and Burge (1988) who argue that there has not been thorough empirical testing to show the effectiveness of the andragogical approach. Hayes(1990:32) comments, *'however, there is not a substantial amount of empirical evidence of the effectiveness of these andragogical or collaborative teaching strategies with adults, either in terms of greater content acquisition, skill development or positive affective outcomes, such as increased satisfaction with learning. In fact, some studies suggest that under certain conditions a more directive, teacher-centred approach may be related to more positive outcomes'*. This supports the notion that an accurate assessment of learner needs at the start of a course may identify which approach the student feels more comfortable with.

Darbyshire (1993) is scathing about the unchallenged implementation of andragogy within nurse education settings, particularly in pre-registration courses. He also argues that the basic underlying principles of the andragogical approach are flawed because they adopt assumptions about learning that are over-simplified and andragogy is seen to be somewhat superior in essence than pedagogy. Jarvis (1987) adds to the debate about andragogy quoting the work of McKenzie in 1977 who argued that as there are fundamental existential differences between children and adults, then pedagogy and andragogy are logically different. Jarvis adds that the basic difference between adults and children is not merely chronological age, but more in the social differences and expectations and possibly in the expectations of teachers. Bernt and Bugbee (1993:99) identified that adult

learners in fact, may need ‘ *more pedagogical contact and evaluative feedback, but by the nature of their course, they receive less*’.

However, when not used in the direct comparison with the education of children, it could be argued that not all of the theoretical assumptions about adults as learners are flawed. As has been shown in this chapter, it is very important to build on the learner's previous education and acknowledge that experience whether it was good or bad. Adult students may well be motivated to learn when they feel ready to, rather than when they are compelled to learn. Waddell(1991) refers to the success of continuing education programmes with students who are motivated to continue their education in comparison with those who are mandated to attend.

It has to be accepted, however, that the amount of self-direction within a student may well be based on many underpinning factors, and it should not be assumed that a student is self-directed merely because they are in adulthood. Knowles (1985) shares this view saying that adults suddenly confronted with an andragogical approach will possibly become more uncertain of themselves and the course, even becoming resistant to learning and resentful of the experience. Research carried out by Tough in 1979 revealed that on the examination of 20 projects on self-directed learning, many adults lost the ability to be self-directing when they entered higher education. This adds support to the notion of an individually-focused approach to students. The work of Burge (1988:12)with adult learners found that ‘*the majority of adult learners express a desire for more but not complete partnership in the planning, organising, delivering and evaluating of courses*’ which suggests that it may well be overwhelming for the student to direct their own study without support and guidance from academic staff. This contradicts Knowles’ first andragogic assumption. However, there is a danger that the student will have to contend with control rather than partnership if the academic does not have a student-centered philosophy.

This implies that it is vital to build up a personal relationship with students and possibly this is even more important for distance learners. This also reinforces the notion that 'andragogy' should be the end-point, not necessarily the means in an educational setting.

This personal approach is valid within nurse education. Murray (in Watson 1989:194) reports that '*caring is as central to the teacher-student relationship as it is to nursing*'. It also demonstrates that the teacher of adults in higher education should be a facilitator of learning, ensuring that the educational climate is right to promote learning in the individual student. This means that there should be a mutual trust between the student and teacher, with close involvement in the diagnosis of the learning needs of the student. This process would develop throughout the course, with the teacher facilitating the evaluation process that the learner would carry out. This is congruent with the notion of the caring curriculum developed by Bevis and Watson (1989).

Eason and Corbett (1991) examined the teacher-student relationship from the student's perspective among a group of nursing students. The students identified four factors that denoted effectiveness which are:-

- the level of knowledge of the teacher
- the organisation of material
- the style of presentation
- the concern of the teacher for improvement.

Within the same study the teachers noted such factors as enthusiasm, being well-prepared, having a clarity of presentation and a love of knowledge as being factors enhancing their effectiveness. As will be seen in chapter four, these factors are very similar to the notions of effective supporting in distance-learning tutoring.

Knowles (1985) advocates that the teacher should be a facilitator of learning, allowing the student to develop individually during a course of study. This philosophy would depend upon whether learning and teaching are seen as being the acquisition of knowledge with the teacher giving the knowledge to the student (as in Knowle's pedagogical assumptions) or learning being the elaboration of metacognitive processes and development of transferable skills with the teacher acting in the facilitatory role identified above.(Boot and Hodgson 1987).

Gardiner (1989) in a review of the literature on adults as learners, identifies that the notion of the teacher knowing more than the student, as outlined above, can be an issue of power, so that the teacher can feel in control and give a sense of order to the teaching role. This view is in accord with the work of Rogers (1978) mentioned earlier. This argument could be applied in nurse training which, until relatively recently, has fitted into a regimented hierarchical structure.

It would seem a possibility to prepare adult learners for an andragogical approach within a supportive learning environment to help them become independent learners. This view is reinforced by Knight and McDonald's (1982) research work carried out in 1977 which demonstrated that adult learners possess the characteristics identified in an andragogical approach. This suggests that it could, in fact, be very frustrating for an adult learner to be placed in a pedagogical learning situation. The overall implication is that adult learners may have complex needs as they enter higher education and that educators should be able to plan the educational programme in conjunction with the learner. This will enable expectations to be addressed, and the planning of an effective learning programmes.

Summary

This chapter has described the nature of adult learning, specifically discussing the motivation of adults, their lack of self-confidence at the start of a course,

predictors that have been used to diagnose 'at-risk' students and the main learning theories that have been written relating to adult learning. What has emerged is the multi-faceted nature of adults who find themselves in higher educational settings and the need for an individualised approach to the support of adult students, whether in full-time or distance learning settings.

The work of Rogers (1978) has been of great influence in the area of education and the need to adopt a 'person-centred' approach. This includes the promotion of self-help in the student with the teacher altering their role from one of control to that of facilitator.

It has to be acknowledged that this process may be extremely challenging for a student who has been used to an educational system that is tightly controlled and it is noted that nurse education may be seen as having had control over a student's learning until recently. The move to a student-centred approach may cause fear in the prospective student and the teacher has to create a supportive learning atmosphere that encourages participation and individual growth. This also supports the need to explore the interaction between the student and tutor in this situation which appears to be lacking in the literature reviewed.

As Frazer noted (in Barnett 1992) it is only the student who can learn - the teacher is there to facilitate the learning process and it takes more than just the presence of the teacher to enable this. The development of students' transferable skills has grown in importance over the years in preference to the teaching of study techniques. However, there has been very little work undertaken to compare the learning needs and experiences of full-time and distance-learning students. The work that has been carried out suggests that adult students face similar issues. This research project intends to examine this in more detail.

This first review chapter has set the scene regarding the learning needs of adults as they enter higher education. It is of relevance to nurse education as the majority of post-registration community students will be unfamiliar to a higher educational setting. The next chapter focuses on the provision of distance learning within nursing and higher education.

CHAPTER THREE: DISTANCE LEARNING IN NURSING AND HIGHER EDUCATION.

Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to discuss the current provision of distance education both within nurse education and higher education. This is followed by a case-study of the Canadian experience of distance learning within nursing. The Canadian situation was chosen to illustrate the excellence that can be achieved through distance education programmes and to demonstrate the nature of growth of distance education within one country. The Canadian experience is relevant to nurse education in the United Kingdom because there has been a move towards graduate entry to practice programmes as a result of a Canadian government mandate called EP2000 (EP means entry to practice). To work in the community, nurses have to hold a degree-level qualification. This is similar to the current trend in the United Kingdom, as discussed in chapter one, although it is recognised that degree-level education is not a statutory regulation in the United Kingdom.

This chapter shows that distance education is an alternate form of educational delivery rather than a separate educational approach, forming part of the umbrella term of flexible learning (Ellington 1995).

Vocational education and distance learning

As will be shown in this section, there has been a growth in the development of distance learning in vocational settings discussed in the literature. In this context, 'vocational education' is defined as a course which awards both an academic and a professional qualification.

Social work education is being undertaken by distance learning with Callahan and Wharf (1989) describing Bachelor of Social Work degree courses on offer to experienced practitioners in Canada. Adams and Hopkins (1995) report the changing nature of social work education in the United Kingdom. Open-learning approaches, which include distance learning are appropriate, they argue, because

they enable the whole learning environment to be addressed and promote active learning strategies. The needs of both students and employers can be met due to the flexibility of the course structure. The negative aspect of open learning is the lack of recognition from government agencies in the support of students undertaking such courses.

Shears (1992) notes the introduction of top-up physiotherapy degree programmes through the University of Dalhousie in Canada. A 'top-up' educational programme is interpreted in this study as the enhancement of an existing qualification.

In the profession of education too, distance education has had a major impact, with top-up degree courses on offer in Thailand (Brahmawong 1993). A multi-disciplinary Master of Clinical Education course was developed in a medical school in Australia (Cox 1993) and the Open University established a post-graduate certificate of education in 1994.

In the education of managers, the past few years have seen the growth of Master of Business Administration courses offered by distance learning through the Open University, as well as many other universities.

The attraction of distance education as a way of promoting student-centred learning within undergraduate medical education is identified by Holsgrove (1991) when he argues that medical education has relied too heavily on rote learning and that distance education, in part, would promote the applicability of knowledge. This is one of the few references to the use of distance education in an undergraduate or pre-registration setting within medicine.

As shown in these examples, distance learning may be a useful way of developing continuing professional development programmes to meet personal and professional requirements such as PREP. Johnston (1993) points out that distance learning makes effective use of time, enabling educators to focus on individual student need.

The provision of degree programmes in nursing

As with the examples from other professions cited above, the emphasis in nursing top-up programmes has been on the upgrading of an academic qualification, rather than the acquisition of an additional professional qualification. One reference was found to the organisation of a distance education programme developed by the Royal College of Nursing and Employment Medical Advisory Service to offer a certificate-level occupational health qualification (Caudwell 1988). In addition, a distance-learning course in occupational health nursing and subsequently in other community health specialities has also been developed in a Scottish university in response to student and employer demand (Lowis and Ellington 1989; Lawton 1993).

Literature information contained on a database at the International Centre for Distance Learning in Milton Keynes reflects the growing provision of nursing courses being offered by distance learning at both continuing education and degree level. Forty different institutions around the world offered such nursing programmes with approximately 50% of them offering degree level education. The details of these courses are shown in Appendix 1.

The descriptions of these courses demonstrate the diversity of distance education programmes, with two main approaches evident:- the print-based approach and the telecommunications approach. Whatever method is employed, the emphasis should, in the author's opinion, be on the constant availability of communication and support for the student. It is interesting to note the attitude of the different institutions to the necessity of attendance on campus for particular elements of a course.

Without exception, these courses share a similar modular or unit-type course structure, with the number of units or modules required to be completed by the student reflecting the individual specification of the University or College. Some universities seemed more willing to acknowledge the student's previous learning

than others, with modified course routes being available for diplomates. This shows the wide-range of distance-learning courses which have been developed to improve accessibility to education for adult learners.

Distance education within higher education

The difference between distance education and traditional education is that there is geographical separation between the learner and tutor for all or part of the time. This means that access to education may be addressed for the student who is unable to move to undertake full-time education.

The issues of access, ability and reward face all educators alike, with the quality of the educational programme being the central focus. In relation to this study, the effectiveness, in terms of the 'fitness for purpose' is also considered to be of importance.

Distance education may be offered in a range of ways, just as with the provision of full-time education. Taylor (1994) suggests that three models of distance education have been in evidence since the beginning of this approach to course delivery. Each model has made use of the latest technology, whether it was the printed word via correspondence courses, multi-media, or the third model which exploits interactive technology. The types of distance education range, at one end of a continuum with the industrial model of the learner interacting with the material alone as promoted through the Keller Plan. This perception of a student sitting in isolation is still rather common. However, at the other end of the continuum would sit the humanistic approach to distance education identified by Nation (1993), with its emphasis on interaction. The interaction model would include such concepts as residential components which were supported by Brackenreg (1991). Collett (1987) argued that most students preferred a combination of approaches to be made.

There has been a great influence of technology on the development of distance education, whether through audio-visual media or computerisation. The use of microwave technology (an example of Taylor's third model of distance education)

has enabled live, interactive television classes to be offered to students in four sites at Washington State University in the United States of America. This facility is funded by the state government and offers a sophisticated, professional system of classroom interaction. The advantage is the ability of students and tutors at various sites to interact. Skills or pieces of equipment are shown in close-up with the overhead camera so that the whole class can see details. Apart from the high cost of establishing and maintaining a facility like this, a potential disadvantage could be the fixed scheduling of the classes, removing the flexibility of when students choose to study.

Within the Open University system in the United Kingdom, students have been offered television programmes, radio programmes and audio-tapes as part of a learning package. This is an important consideration, as it offers the learner a variety of learning approaches and illustrates the second model of distance-learning mentioned by Taylor. However, as in the high technological approach identified before, the financial implications of the multi-media approach would be out of the reach of many smaller organisations implementing distance-learning programmes. In addition, there has to be the developmental time for the production of such materials. For this reason, perhaps, there has been a focus on the more paper-based type of distance-learning material. This paper-based version enables students to undertake courses without access to a computer. In addition, it may reflect the limited experience that many educators have of computer-based learning.

Johnston (1993:68) notes that 80% of distance learning is offered through the medium of print because *'it is the cheapest model, it is the most easily updated and it follows the old maxim that one should use the simplest and cheapest teaching material available to deliver effectively the desired learning outcomes'*.

No matter how the material is presented to the students, it has to be of high quality, so that it is effective (in the terms of being fit for purpose).

Connors (1979) states that the material should have the following qualities:

- have clarity
- be interesting and readable
- be relevant
- appreciate the fact that the student may have limited studying time
- be well 'signposted'

These five elements demonstrate the need for the careful planning of distance-learning material, a view that is shared by Collett et al (1987) and Burge and Lenskyj(1990).The resource implications in the development of distance-learning material of high quality have also to be recognised, especially when the course developers are also implementing the course. Thorpe (1988) discusses the closeness that a tutor working within the setting of distance learning may have to the material. This closeness ranges from the tutor who both writes and implements the material to the adaptation of bought in material for implementation to the purchase of material ready prepared. Shears (1992) recommends the use of an educational consultant to assist in the development of 'in-house' distance learning and refers to such a process as distance learning on a 'shoe-string'. However, this may prove very expensive and make development costs prohibitive, reinforcing the need for sound business-planning . Dillon et al (1989) argue that many lecturers have little training to prepare them to adapt their teaching skills to distance-learning work and it could be argued that the same may apply regarding the costs of distance-learning development. The opposing view would be the risk of producing inadequate material if such expertise is not sought and supports Dillon et al's view about the specialised nature of distance-learning development.

The implementation of distance-learning material poses the ultimate dilemma for the teacher. Is there any guarantee that the students complete the distance-learning material? This question may be asked by teachers who disagree with the student-centred approach advocated by Rogers (1978). One of the key features of this humanistic approach is the element of trust in the student. By the same token, it could be argued that not every full-time student attends all classes and is actually

listening to every word that is being said by the lecturer! As discussed in the earlier chapter on adult learning, the amount of learning that takes place in the traditional lecture format may be questioned.

One advantage of distance learning is that the material can be consulted on more than one occasion. Shipway (1995) also poses the dilemma that students may assume that in distance learning, the tutors may be seen as not 'doing anything'. If distance-learning tutors are measured within a conventional framework, this attitude may be held by the academic institute also. One of the dangers of distance learning could be the development of assessment strategies that over-assess students to compensate for the loss of visual contact with the student. Boondao(1991) argues that the implementation of tutor-marked assignments is a western approach, but also notes that they can be useful in the provision of student feedback. The over-assessment of courses may be an example of the quantifiable approach to education, identified by Biggs (1994) in the chapter on adult education.

The advantages of distance education mean that access to education can be offered to students living in remote areas. In addition, because of the structure of distance-learning courses, students can have a degree of flexibility in the pacing of their study. This can be advantageous for the student who is working or has other commitments. In particular, in nurse education, as many of the potential students are women, it could be argued that part-time study may fit in with their life-styles. The design of distance learning itself relates to the notions of self-directed learning in that the student has to undertake the majority of the studying away from the host institution and other students. This approach may aid in the empowerment of the student and may promote the andragogical notion of education as argued by the author earlier. Such advantages are congruent with the aims of higher educational provision for nursing as identified in the introductory chapter. At an institutional level, distance education may seem an attractive way of enrolling more students on full-cost courses to generate income.

However, many of these advantages have corresponding disadvantages too. The first one is the potential isolation that self-study may present a student. As was shown in the chapter on the learning needs of adults, such students may need much support as they return to study. Connors (1979) notes this lack of access to others as being a difficulty. Associated with this lack of access to other students and tutors is the lack of access to resources. This may lead to frustration for the learner and possibly may account for the high drop-out rates associated with some distance-learning courses as reported by Sligo(1991). O'Dell (1993) notes that the library facilities for distance-learning students range from no provision at all to those that offer satellite branches or develop the campus collection. The provision of reference material may be problematic for the distance learner who has little access to library facilities.

The provision of a postal loan scheme is a newer development when students might be offered a list of titles, so that they still have to undertake a problem-solving approach to obtain the literature.

Under-resourcing of both academic and public libraries has added to the difficulties for distance-learning students according to Unwin (1994). She undertook a questionnaire of 350 distance-learning students to identify their difficulties with library access. Two hundred and ten students returned the questionnaire and the main findings were the desire for equivalent access to educational libraries with full-time students.

Tucker (1993) argues that the distance learner is as 'real' as a full-time student as they are enrolled in a university, are studying for degree courses and therefore have similar needs as other students. This shows that access to library facilities is not only a practical problem but also is a major part of the educational process. This lack of gaining access to a library may mean that students need help in developing their information-seeking skills. This view is supported by Behrens (1993), Harrington and Spindle (1993) and Lange and Farr (1993) who comment

that , *'the need for adequate library resources is acknowledged as a prerequisite for degree programmes'*.

In addition, because distance-learning students may be unfamiliar with higher education, they may be unfamiliar with academic libraries. This adds support to the need for library-skills classes early on in the course and also reinforces the theme identified earlier that adult learners may need guidance on how to learn.

Having raised the key issues within distance learning and higher education, a case-study is now presented.

Canada-a case study of distance education in nursing

In 1989, Viverais-Dresler discussed the limitations to career advancement for nurses in Canada who were not graduates, outlining the growing demand for flexible degree programmes that would be suitable for the majority of students who could not move into full-time higher education, due to work and family commitments. The development of a distance-education programme in 1987 was an attempt to meet the needs of such students and highlighted the potential success of collaboration between different institutions as well as differing ways of delivering a distance education course.

The emphasis on continuing education and the move towards degree-level education developed rapidly in Canada in the early 1980s. Waddell (1991) discusses the meta-analysis of 34 continuing education courses carried out by Cervero in 1985 which demonstrated the positive effect that continuing education has on nursing practice. Similarly, Turner (1991) reports a study carried out on 244 nurses who rated continuing education as being of personal as well as professional benefit.

However, Turner also reports a study carried out by Ferrell in 1988 which showed that there were no significant changes in care by attending continuing education with similar findings also reported by Oliver in 1984 and del Bueno in 1977. What

is not discussed in these reports is the nature or level of courses undertaken. It could be argued that it depends on the course taken as to its benefits.

In the spring of 1993, the Canadian University Distance Education Directory listed the 38 institutions across Canada which offered distance education programmes in topics ranging from agriculture to women's studies. Eleven of these institutes were listed as offering nursing programmes and attempts were made to contact all of them. Ten responded, including one, (the University of Alberta) responding that they no longer offered distance education programmes as such, but had moved to 'off-campus' taught courses. Therefore, the provision of the remaining 9 institutions is described below in alphabetical order, based on the data gathered from the information and prospectuses provided by the individual institutions. (The information relating to the University of Victoria can be found within the reference to the Open Learning Agency).

- **Athabasca University**

From the comprehensive information sent by Athabasca University in Alberta, information was gained on the whole university as well as the faculty of nursing. It has offered distance education programmes since 1972, now offering 6 major undergraduate degree programme areas and 8 university certificate courses. There were plans to introduce a Masters in Distance Education programme from the autumn of 1994.

The Bachelor of Nursing programme at Athabasca recognised a registered nurse as having gained approximately half the total credits needed for a full degree, thus this course required the student to complete 69 credits in comparison to the full 120 credit-programmes for the general Bachelor of Arts award. However, nursing qualifications gained more than 10 years prior to application were not recognised. The entry requirements were that the student was resident in Alberta and held a current licence to practice.

The course was divided into nursing and non-nursing units, with 30 credits being allocated to the former and 39 to the latter, one of which is a compulsory English course. In total, this equates to an approximate study time of some 880 hours which the student can complete over a three to seven year period.

The units were rated at 3,4 or 6 credits each, and there was a maximum time limit set for their completion - 6 months for the 3-credit courses and one year for the 6-credit courses.

Each unit was despatched to the student as a complete learning package comprising of printed texts, audio and video recordings, as well as listings of radio and television programmes. Approximately 60-70% of the course was undertaken through reading; 15-20% in writing and the remainder of the time spent in discussion and examinations.

The assessment of this programme was by a combination of continuous assessment and examinations, which were taken in a local study centre at the request of the student. The assessment load for the 30 credit nursing units consisted of approximately 20 assignments, 7 examinations and 2 practical assessments.

The support offered to enrolled students was very structured, with a programme of guidance being offered from application to completion of the course. Students received academic guidance from an advisor with regard to the nursing programme. They were also allocated a personal tutor who could be contacted through a reverse-charge telephone number and guided the student's academic progress as well as marking coursework and examinations. In addition, there were 3 centres within Alberta where the student could gain advice about distance education.

- **University of British Columbia**

This university offered full-time and distance-education degree programmes which it referred to as 'Guided Independent Study Courses' in a range of subjects from agricultural science to post-registration nursing. The registered nurse slotted in to the Bachelor of Science in Nursing course at the third year level and could complete the remainder of the course by distance education. They had to complete 62 credits, 18 of which were electives. In the course handbook, the unit descriptors informed the prospective student about the type of courses available as well as using codes to show the structure of the unit. For example, Unit NURS 305 which was called 'Professional Nursing in Contemporary Society II', the symbols for video and audio-tape appeared along with a four-line aim of the unit and the start/finishing date. This enabled the student to see the type of unit that had to be undertaken and would be especially useful in selecting the elective units.

To be eligible to enrol on this programme, students were required to be registered for practice in British Columbia, as well as providing evidence of an ability to practice competently. This evidence was supplied in the form of references, recent graduation or the completion of a recent refresher course. There was a facility for students to register for the course by using a special telephone system with 'action codes' so a student could add a course, change options or even cancel their registration. However, the university monitored the system closely, so it would not be possible to register if fees had not been paid.

Course material was sent as a complete package including video and audio cassettes, laboratory packs (where appropriate) as well as the course manual which contained the instructions and assignment details. There were deadline dates for the completion of assignments and examinations were held six times a year. Within the handbook, there were no specific details of the number of assessments that the student has to complete per unit.

The details of the support offered to students was contained in the clearly presented student handbook which would answer many of the questions distance-

learning students may well have, as well as giving general guidance about studying skills. A self-assessment sheet was also included to form the basis of a preliminary study tutorial with the personal tutor. The support offered to enrolled students included a reverse-charge telephone line to a personal tutor. This facility could also be used to contact the bookshop to order text-books. In addition, there was a student counselling and resource centre on-campus.

- **The University of New Brunswick**

Within the faculty of Nursing at New Brunswick (Fredericton Campus), undergraduate and post-registration degree programmes were available. A post-registration student completed 84 credit hours in recognition of existing qualifications in comparison to the 152 credit hours that undergraduate students completed. A part-time student could take up to 10 years to complete their Bachelor of Nursing programme. Six non-nursing credit courses should be completed with a minimum grade average of 'B' before acceptance into the nursing programme.

The nursing course units were offered at introductory and upper level, with students having to complete the introductory courses first. Within the prospectus, students were advised whether the course was offered by teleconferencing to one of twelve sites or by other means. The teleconference was held from every site once a term which was popular with students. Any course that had a clinical component was assessed by local site instructors.

To be eligible for enrolment on this course, a student had to be registered with the Nurses Association of New Brunswick, hold a diploma-level qualification and have practised for one year since completion of the diploma.

The support network was structured for those students both within reach of Fredericton and further away through a community liaison service situated in 7 locations throughout the province. This enabled feedback about expressed needs for course to be communicated directly to the University. Additionally, there was an

association for both on- and off-campus mature students which was more of a 'self-help' group.

The members of the Nursing Faculty ensured that the students were visited personally on an annual basis to receive feedback about the course and allow the student to discuss their learning development. There was also a 24-hour answer-phone for students to use, and problems could be addressed through this.

- **The Open Learning Agency**

The Open Learning Agency is an adult and vocationally-based agency in British Columbia which was established in 1988 as a result of the Open Learning Agency Act and consists of three sections, namely, the Open University, the Open College and the Knowledge Network. The agency offered professional continuing education in professions such as the Hotel trade, Dental Association, Chartered Accountancy and Nursing. Courses undertaken could be used as credit towards Diploma and Degree-level courses offered through the Agency in partnership with the University of British Columbia and the University of Victoria.

There were also adult basic education programmes for adults who did not hold secondary school completion certificates. It appeared to address the whole range of education for adults from basic literacy through to degree programmes.

Within its nursing programme, a refresher course had been designed for qualified nurses who had been out of the workplace for more than 5 years and wished to re-register with the Registered Nurses Association of British Columbia. This was composed of two units of study which involved theory, practice and an examination at the end. There was a flexible starting date, so students could enrol when they were ready to do so.

Additionally, there was a unit on nephrology nursing as a continuing education programme and rated at two credits. To enter this 23 week course, the student had to be a registered nurse.

For the registered nurse holding an Advanced Diploma in a nursing speciality undertaken at the British Columbia Institute of Technology, who wanted to complete his/her studies to degree level, there was a Bachelor of Health Science (Nursing) course which required an additional 69 credits to be gained over a period of approximately 6 years.

Courses were delivered by complete learning packages including notes, video and audio-tape, teleconferencing and the television service operated by the Open Learning Agency which is known as the 'Knowledge Network'.

Every student is allocated a personal tutor who contacts the student on enrolment and whom, as with the universities already mentioned, students could telephone by reverse charges from anywhere in British Columbia.

- **The University of Calgary**

This University offered a Bachelor of Nursing programme that could be completed over a period of five years on a part-time basis or over a full-time equivalent basis (termed fast-tracking). Recognition was given to previous experience and qualifications, with the students undertaking an assessment procedure to gain exemption. Eight nursing units form the specialist portion of the degree with the remaining 4 units being selected from a range of arts and humanities subjects.

To be eligible for this course, students had to have average passes of at least 65% in level-5 credit courses in English, mathematics, chemistry, biology and one other subject; hold a registered nurse diploma qualification; provide two references and hold a current cardio-pulmonary certificate. Preference was given to residents of Alberta who applied, although it was not an actual requirement of this course, unlike some of the other institutions.

The course was delivered through learning packages which may include written material, video and audio-tapes, teleconferencing and workshops held within the campus.

With regard to student support teleresource centres had been established throughout Alberta to assist communication and access to academic staff and fellow students. Accompanying the leaflet about the course, there was a document entitled 'The First Step' which was designed to help students make the decision about enrolling on the course. It was extremely 'user-friendly', explaining the highs and lows of being a distance-learning student when the student is what is termed a 'multiple role individual'. It addressed many of the concerns about distance education that a student may have. The members of the nursing faculty had an interest in discussing the details of the programme with applicants, so the information sent out was introductory, rather than containing full details of the course.

- **Laurentian University**

A Bachelor of Science (Nursing) post-registration degree was established in 1987 with students taking between 6 and 8 years to complete the ten unit degree programme. Entry requirements included a registered nursing certificate, and evidence of a community college diploma.

The course was offered through a variety of distance education approaches including text-based, and teleconferencing. The materials could be sent directly to the students or could be collected from one of the satellite centres set up within Ontario. The members of the faculty of nursing acted as course tutors to the distance-learning students.

- **Dalhousie University**

The Master of Nursing programme was offered through the school of nursing on both a full and part-time basis over a two-year period to enable graduate nurses extend their research and clinical knowledge in a specialist area. Examples of specialist areas included community health nursing, paediatric nursing, midwifery, psychiatric and adult nursing.

This course offered teleconferenced courses within the taught component as well as a lot of independent work by the student in order to complete the required thesis.

The entry requirements stated that students had to be registered to practise nursing in Canada or a foreign country, obtained a grade average of 'B', had completed research and statistics in their undergraduate course, practised in their named speciality for at least two years, provide three references, undertake an admission test and attend for a personal interview.

- **University of Ottawa**

Instead of being sent specific details about the Bachelor of Nursing Science course on offer at this University, details were sent about the teleconferencing system of delivery which had been in operation since 1981 and was the main teaching mode (McDonnell 1993) supplementing other course material such as books and articles. Thirty-two remote sites were used and the distance-learning students received their classes 'live' along with their on-campus student colleagues. Distance-learning courses, therefore, did not receive specially-produced distance-learning material.

Students could access the same student support services that were on offer to full-time students with a reverse-charge telephone line that could connect them to their tutors, academic advisors and the library.

The distance education students had a well-organised administrative system which was overseen by a distance education co-ordinator who had a team of 3 people working to ensure the liaison between all the teleconferencing sites was maintained. Former students often acted in the capacity of contact person for the remote sites.

Discussion about the Canadian Experience of Distance Education in Nursing.

This small case-study has shown that distance education is well-established in Canada at all levels of adult education, and within nursing it addresses the needs of nurses returning to work after a career break right through to Master's level education. This adds support to Garrison's assertion (1990) about the growth of distance education in the last twenty years as mentioned in chapter one. It also reflects the recognition of the need for flexibility within post-registration nurse education.

The previous knowledge of registered nurses is considered of value, with a range of exemptions being offered to students through assessment of prior learning schemes which recognise the importance of the previous learning of the student. There was a ten-year time limit set for the recognition of previous courses by Athabasca University. Two universities specified that students should hold 'b' grade passes to enable entry to their particular courses, rather than enabling entry at diploma-level. It is not clear whether this aims to limit the places available to students or whether any compensation was made for adult students without such grades.

The time allowed to complete distance-learning courses ranged from two to ten years. However, there was a time-limit for the completion of units following enrolment.

Three universities offered Bachelor of Nursing programmes, with four offering Bachelor of Science in Nursing programmes. Many of the courses insisted that students completed some non-nursing subjects to broaden their educational experience in addition to undertaking theoretical and practical nursing subjects. This may well have the advantage of broadening the scope of study to other subjects, but it could be argued that such options may detract from the nursing degree. However, if a university is committed to the concept of transferable skills, then the benefits of widening the scope of the programme of study could be accepted as being beneficial.

All the courses describe complete learning packages that contain all the information about a unit and its assessment. The variety of teaching approaches is noted with a learning package comprising of course-books, reading material, video and audio-tapes, and any other equipment that might be needed. However, this may prevent the development of library skills and information-seeking skills.

The University of Ottawa demonstrates the specific use of teleconferencing technology, with off-campus students attending remote classrooms to access classes relayed to them via this sophisticated network. This enables visual contact to be made with tutors and fellow students, which may be a positive aspect for the remote student. Such a variety of approaches reflects the three models of distance learning described by Taylor (1994). However, a potential negative factor is that the student is timetabled to attend a remote classroom at a fixed time, which may affect the flexibility of the programme.

Apart from the practical experiences, the teleconferencing and the few work-shops that might be arranged for the week-ends, there appears to be little face-to-face teaching. It could be argued that the teleconferencing provided the visual contact. Frazier and Billings (1988) report that videoconferencing is an effective way of providing support, provided provision is made for personal and technical support.

Despite the lack of face-to-face contact between the student and the teaching staff, there is a lot of emphasis placed on the support services available for distance education students. The universities appear to recognise the needs of adult students who may not have been in the formal education system for some time. Information and guidance is available from the time that the student is deciding about enrolment. This focuses on the view of education as a process from an initial enquiry through to graduation. However, one potentially negative aspect of this support is the division of advice between an academic advisor and a nursing specialist. For the adult student who may be lacking self-confidence, there could be some conflict and confusion if advice is obtained from different people. Within the personal tutorial system, the initiation of student contact by the tutor following

enrolment may assist in the feeling of connection with the university. One issue that cannot be answered is whether a student-tutor relationship can develop if there is no meeting. However, when the geographical distances in Canada are considered, such meetings may not be feasible.

A particularly useful document was the 'first steps' paper issued by the nursing faculty at the University of Calgary which gave potential students a taste of the commitment that would be needed to cope with life as a distance learner; there was also a comprehensive student handbook issued by the University of British Columbia, which would ensure that students knew the facilities on offer to them as distance-learning students. There was also encouragement for students to contact course tutors at the enrolment stage to discuss courses in more detail as well as being allocated academic advisors within the University. Students have free telephone access to on-campus libraries and book-stores as well as being able to contact their personal tutors.

Some of the Universities offered regional resource centres similar to the Open University system of local study centres which provide contact with staff and other students. This service offers students the opportunity to mix with other students in the area as well as give them access to course literature. This access to resources may help the development of learning skills. Distance learners are also eligible to join mature students' associations within their respective universities to enable them to feel a sense of belonging with other students. This highlights one of the major differences between distance learning and on-campus courses which is the sense of belonging to the student body.

The Canadian case-study shows how well-established distance education is within higher education. The needs of an adult student population have been addressed in a variety of ways through the development of flexible, accessible programmes. The quality of the information that the students received appears to be comprehensive and clear. However, it is acknowledged that in reporting the content of university course information, the 'effectiveness' of the programmes

discussed cannot be assessed. It also shows the differing approaches to distance education.

Summary

In this chapter, the provision of distance learning within nursing and higher education settings has been established. The example of the provision of distance learning within the Canadian higher education sector has been elaborated upon by means of a case-study of nursing courses. This has shown that within distance learning, a wide range of approaches may be used. The choice of approach may be determined by the availability of resources for development and implementation. The importance of access to student support mechanisms which promote student contact with both academic staff and other students has been highlighted. This will be developed further in the next chapter. The issue of resourcing and access to libraries has also been discussed. It shows that there may be a need to ensure that students gain confidence and skills in library-seeking skills early on in the course of their studies. In order to be an effective mode of course delivery, this chapter has also indicated the need for quality issues to be addressed, both in the material and the preparation of the course team.

CHAPTER FOUR : SUPPORT WITHIN DISTANCE EDUCATION

Introduction

As the effectiveness of distance learning in nurse education is the aim of this research project, it is argued that the issue of student support is fundamental to this notion of effectiveness. As shown in the preceding chapters, adult and distance learners may require support during their education. The aim of this chapter, therefore, is to discuss the concept of support in greater depth and to propose a model of supportive learning. It is suggested that while support has been defined, there are no models of supportive learning in existence that describe the learning process within distance learning settings.

The need for student support in distance education

Earwaker (1992) notes the lack of literature relating to student support and the need for it to become a mainstream part of higher education. He writes, *'the aim in providing support is not simply to enable students to survive, but to ensure that they derive maximum benefit from their course'* (Earwaker 1992:11).

In this context, Earwaker is writing about traditional higher educational settings. He discusses the development of support through curriculum development in the changing environment of higher education. This is directly applicable to distance learning too, as support could become a main part of the curriculum. This is because students undertaking distance-learning programmes study alone for the majority of the time. Earwaker's statement emphasises the need to focus on the process of learning, rather than only preventing students dropping-out of a course.

The importance of the relationship in distance learning between the student and the tutor is commented on by Naylor et al (1990) in their study of the usage of student support services by Open University students. In addition, Holmberg (1993) reflects on the continuance and closeness of the relationship between the student and the tutor after the completion of the education. Although he

acknowledges that this relationship may not reflect the quality of a course, it may help to refute the notion that distance learning is isolating. It would, however, appear that Earwaker would disagree with Holmberg's view of the friendship between a student and tutor. Such a friendship, he argues, would be unlikely to develop due to the context of the relationship within higher education. This is supported by Earwaker who notes that the student and tutor are there on different terms. Furthermore, as has been shown earlier, there may be an expectation by the student that the tutor has greater knowledge. This might be the case at the beginning of the course where the tutor had more knowledge about the system of higher education, but this stance could be challenged for those students adding to their knowledge in a subject like community nursing, where many students are already working in the speciality. It could be argued that there is more opportunity for the levelling of the relationship, especially if a student-centred approach is being adopted as described in an earlier chapter.

The individual support needs that each distance learner may have requires a problem-solving approach to avoid the student feeling a sense of disconnection with the educational establishment. A sense of caring can be offered within a personal tutorial system to avoid this feeling of isolation within an impersonal system, according to Jaques (1990).

Watt (1994) calls for the organisation of the support services offered to all undergraduates in order to formalise the acquisition of transferable skills. In addition, Simpson (1992) indicates a growing need for the individuality of the support system, due to issues of quality. He reports that the growing competition between institutions offering distance learning courses indicate that those who can offer individualised support may attract more students.

Even with distance-learning material of a high quality, the interaction that takes place between a student and tutor, as well as between other students may add to the educational experience of the student. This is particularly relevant in this

research project because this is how effectiveness is defined i.e. the focus on the learning process and its usefulness to the student. As shown in the chapter on adult-learning, the previous experience of students may mean that much of the personal tutorial system has to address the experiences and expectations that a student may have. Valcke et al (1991) call for more research 'which focuses on the strategies to detect and involve those actually in need of support'. This reinforces the notion of the development of a supportive model of learning. Perhaps the research undertaken by Powell et al (1990) has addressed this request in their research attempting to predict academic success. However, this does not address the process of support offered to students.

A system of tutorial support being a requirement during a course is supported by the work of Brindley and Maxim (1990). Having introduced a self-referral system of support with adult distance-learners, they found that only about a third of students made use of the services. In addition, the students who really needed support did not use it, although they admit that they do not have any research base to support this assumption. For this reason, Brindley and Maxim (1990) decided to make the tutorial support a compulsory part of the programme. Brindley and Maxim aimed to improve the completion rates of the course by 10% through the development of the tutorial support offered to students. The effectiveness of the learning experience was not the main reason for this change in the course, but a quality control issue.

Opposing this view is that uncertainty may lead students to contact tutors due to the lack of self-confidence that they may have. Hall et al (1993) undertook a postal questionnaire which reveals that 827 students (60%) initiated tutor contact with regard to assignment completion. The authors conclude that such student-led contact was empowering. In terms of the confidence that a student may develop in contacting a tutor, this may be valid, however, it could also lead to a dependency on the tutor which is not empowering at all. Valcke et al (1991) discuss the findings of a study which seemed to suggest that students

who became very dependent on support services were weak academically. It could be argued that a tutorial system that is a requirement of a course indicates a degree of tutor control over a student. However, at an initial meeting, contact can be made, issues discussed and joint goals set. If the student has few learning needs, then the tutor can help to build and extend the learning experience. This, it is proposed, would not be controlling, but facilitating. The next section moves on to offer a definition of the term support.

A definition of the meaning of the term support

The Open University defines support as being '*the advice, help and support given to students to enable them to make satisfactory progress in the system*' (Bailey and Moore 1989). They differentiate between academic support and the more pastoral aspects of support counselling. However, in the Open University definition, there is no explanation as to what the term satisfactory progress might mean. For the student, it may be the learning process as well as the outcome, but the institution may be more concerned with the outcome. Earwaker (1991:102) notes the cultural influence on the notion of student support. He argues that the growth of professional counsellors occurred in the American higher education system. The provision of student-support services in distance education may be available in two ways. It can focus on either course content and progression with course material or, according to Simpson (1992), this role may be combined. Dekkers et al (1988) report the need for support to be able to address content and the individual academic concerns of the student.

Lebel (1989) defines support as being the aid for the learner to achieve the goals of the programme and independence through four strategies, namely, cognitive, affective, metacognitive and motivational. The Unit for the Development of Adult and Continuing Education (UDACE) defines support as containing seven skills namely: "informing, advising, counselling, assessing, enabling, advocating and feeding back" (Vowles 1990). This is more explicit than the Open University definition and shows that the role of the 'supporter'

may address course and personal issues in combination. This dual approach to student support is also supported by Valcke et al (1991) who define support as those student characteristics which are identified as study behaviours and socio-demographic variables. However, in an action research study undertaken with 200 second-year business students, Davies (1995) reports that the full-time students focus on the assignment and completion of their course. This suggests that the role of the tutor may involve the development of process skills. The notion of advocacy seems to be relevant to a student-group who are remote and scattered, having a minimal amount of contact with the institution.

According to Wankowski (1991:97) the separation of the counselling role and the academic tutoring role has been a consequence of the lack of educational training for many university teachers. This should not occur within a community nursing course as many tutors hold educational qualifications. Nevertheless, the special skills required to tutor distance-learning programmes may not be included in many teaching curricula. The development of a supportive framework for learning may help in this aspect of teacher preparation.

If students attend university infrequently, it may be difficult for them to access a structured student counselling service. One of the reasons for the course tutor being the supporter would combat this difficulty. Furthermore, Valcke et al (1991) propose that support can be offered to students by personal contact from the course tutor, community supervisor and the distance-learning material itself. They note that student characteristics may be relevant depending on a range of variables present at the beginning of a course.

Zajkowski (1993) reports on the very high drop-out rate from distance learning business courses at the Open Polytechnic of New Zealand. This rate of 56-68% drop-out was addressed by improving the pre-course information given to students to avoid 'study overload' as well as a mechanism of identifying potential 'at risk' students. This demonstrates the proactive nature of support. The identification of 'high risk' students is also reported by Brindley and

Maxim(1990) who note that student support may be one way to improve course completion.

The range of functions that a support system may offer is reported by Valcke et al (1991:9). They identified six categories of support which were classified as the type and function of support. The main categories include supporting the student in the development of transferable skills, helping them learn how to learn and enabling them to take an active part in the student body. This is called person-centred support. Three categories address more course-related issues such as course organisation, academic issues and feedback which is called problem-centred support. The final two categories address quality control aspects of support both at an individual and course level.

Valcke et al's work (1991) shows the range of supportive functions that a tutor may address when working with a distance-learning student, both in academic and non-academic categories. The areas of support provide a way of enabling the student to understand the structure of the course they are undertaking as well as advising on issues of personal and course issues. This is similar to the definitions of student support outlined by the Open University and UDAEC. The functions of support break the role of support down into discrete parts. It shows the potential for the role of the distance-learning tutor as well as the stresses that such a broad role may place on the tutor. Most of the categories are self-explanatory, however a category called 'settled connection' is defined as the need for guidance at certain times during a course. However, there is no reference to a model or framework through which this comprehensive plan could be implemented. This would seem an important omission in view of the quality control aspects highlighted.

To add support to the focus of this project, Valcke et al (1991) examine the notion that research in distance education has addressed the outcome of study, rather than the process. In addition, Simpson (1992) comments that student support has focused largely on the intellectual skills alone, rather than

addressing the learners' needs holistically. This has arisen due to the lack of understanding about the tutor's rôle.

Pym (1992) argues that the definition of support should recognise gender issues. Contact with the instructor and other students are an essential aspect of support. If there is a general lack of support at home, the opportunities for sharing support with other students and tutors may be essential for the isolated student. In addition a supportive approach to learning that recognises the complexity of a student's life may lead to empowerment, rather than victim-blaming for the problems that may arise because of it.

Kirkup and Von Prümmer (1990) researched the needs of women students at two European distance learning universities by sending them a questionnaire. The sample consisted of 2430 students at the Fernuniversität in Germany which achieved a 49% response rate (51% of whom were women). The comparative sample at the Open University in England consisted of 2500 which brought a 65% response rate (54% of whom were women). The two respondent groups were then matched by subject area. The data analysis reveals that more women attend local study centres, even when the personal circumstances make this very difficult. The major difference between the male and female respondents in why they attend is to have contact with other students. The percentage of male and female German students who attended the study centres is 40% female and 28% male. The British students report that 51% of females and 37% of male students attend the study centres. However, there is no difference in the contact with the tutors. The authors suggest that women want connection with other students, because they feel that it will be a positive aid to learning, not that it is because they are more dependent as learners. This is supportive of the assumption made by Pym (1992) above and also has relevance to the current study, as the vast majority of students are female.

Perspectives of support

In a discussion paper written in 1976 Gibbs and Durbridge outlined the characteristics that a distance-learning tutor should possess. It extolled the tutor in a detailed way as being knowledgeable, but not overly academic. Tutors should also possess well-developed written and oral communication skills both for the teaching function that they might undertake as well as the tutoring role. In addition, it was suggested that the distance-learning tutor should have an interesting style and competence in handling administrative affairs. This was described as being able to work hard and the ability to process work efficiently, but in an informal way. Davies (1995) reports that the students in her action research study (referred to earlier) identified that the lecturer should be a 'friendly boffin'. Naylor and Cowie (1990) report on the relevance to Open University surveys of the factor identified as 'tutor helpfulness'. Out of a sample of 5763 students 60% agreed with the statement 'a good tutor can make a course, a poor tutor can spoil one'. This suggests that the role of the tutor may be crucial to the learning experience of the distance learner.

A doctoral thesis that examined the effects of student-tutor interaction (Brady 1976) in distance education reported that those students who saw their tutors as 'positive initiators' of interaction expressed more satisfaction with their course. This could imply that students felt that more personal contact improved their learning experience.

Naylor and Cowie (1990) assert that the role of the tutor in open learning settings is fundamental to the welfare of the student. They say, '*One of the most important responsibilities open learning institutions have towards their students ...lies in using systems of quality control and professional development to ensure that tutors are 'good' and 'helpful'*' (page 9). These same qualities are also mentioned by Cole et al (1986). It may be challenging for distance-learning tutors to move away from the imparting of knowledge to the support and guidance of students.

However, as Bailey (1992) notes, some tutors are able to incorporate the teaching and facilitatory aspects of their role.

In a longitudinal study of 18 Open University students, Beaty and Morgan (1992) found that the students' initial view of the of the tutor was as the expert who would be able to give them the answers they were looking for. During the course of their learning, the 18 students moved to a more independent role. However, the methodological issues are not described in this report. The findings reinforce the notion of uncertainty that adult students may have when entering university as shown earlier.

This suggests that 'staff development' is important to ensure that tutors changing to work with open and distance-learning students are readily prepared for the demands of dealing with students who are only in face-to-face contact for a limited time. Granger (1989) outlines a two-phase orientation programme for tutors working with distance-learning students. He criticises the unsatisfactory nature of industrialised distance learning courses which do not address the learning needs of individual students. Lentell (1995) asserts that the special characteristics of tutoring distance-learning students enables the tutor to anticipate potential areas of difficulty that each student may have. Within the Open University system, there are specialist teams of part-time tutors who can focus on the support of students. However, not all tutors have the freedom to promote learning as Lentell (1995) suggests. As shown in the chapter on distance education, there are tutors who are developing material and tutoring at the same time. Despite this, the close involvement of a course team with the development and teaching of the course means that they are knowledgeable about the subject content and level being studied. Although it can be onerous having to be developer, teacher and supporter at once, this does ensure that the tutors are closely identified by the students as being knowledgeable about the areas of study.

The notion of the closeness of the tutor to the material may be debated. In a study carried out by Thompson (1990) one of the findings of the study suggested that it may be influential. His study focuses on students who had chosen not to study by distance learning, preferring part-time study. The study was carried out in two stages. Initially 423 part-time students were surveyed to gather their views about distance education. A response rate of 75% was achieved. Those who had rated distance learning as very negative or negative were then asked to participate in the second stage of the study. This means that the sample consisted of people who had negative impressions of distance learning. A sample of 48 was finally achieved, although it is not clear from which of the initial groups this final sample emerged. Structured interviews with the 48 students indicated that the main negative feeling was the lack of interaction with the instructor (although it is not specified whether the instructor included a supporter and/or tutor). The researcher suggests that periodic meetings could be a possible solution to this. It was suggested that this would be preferable to telephone contact.

However, active feedback from students with regard to the quality of their tutorial support may be difficult to evaluate other than by anonymous means. The student might feel vulnerable to make a complaint in person. By encouraging students to provide qualitative feedback, Naylor and Cowie (1990) assert that this would empower students. However, due to their previous educational experience, it may take a considerable time for the student to feel confident enough to provide feedback, especially if it is negative. It possibly depends on the stage they are at in their programme of study. In addition, tutors will need a support system themselves to be able to deal constructively with the sometimes negative criticism that may arrive.

There appears to be some uncertainty about the role of the tutor in distance education, according to Crawford (1992). In a qualitative study undertaken by Anderson (1989), eight tutors found difficulty in the definition and aspects of their role. In a report by Baath and Wangdahl (1976) it was also suggested

that tutors found it difficult to identify student problems as well as feeling rather isolated. This report mentioned key functions of the tutor's role as being motivation, stimulation and tutor support. This suggests that it might not only be the distance-learning student who has the potential to be isolated, but the tutor as well. It also shows that a framework which may help to identify the needs of students may assist in the tutor's role development.

In a discussion paper presented in 1983, Stewart identified the need to introduce an intermediary who can offer counselling to distance-learning students. It was suggested that this was not the tutor. The reason for this is that it was necessary to have a mediated role between the student and the organisation. However, in a situation where a personal relationship can develop through regular student contact, perhaps the course tutor can refer students to the existing counselling service, if necessary. In a student-centered approach, the personal tutor could act as mediator.

Earwaker (1991) interviewed year and course tutors about their experiences of supporting students who approached them with many problems. Although the actual methodology is not detailed, the findings indicate that many of the tutors felt out of their depth when working with students who had personal problems. One of the advantages of working as a nurse tutor means that the previous nursing experience of the tutor would prepare them for this type of role. However, while there are many frameworks for nursing interventions in patient care settings, there is not the availability of similar frameworks for nurse educators working in higher educational settings.

A supportive role is needed because distance-learning students tend to be adult learners and as discussed earlier, they may have anxieties about undertaking higher education. This, in turn may make them uncertain about who to approach for support if a system of support is not offered.

The qualities of the tutor highlighted in a study carried out by Clarke, et al in 1986 included:

- subject matter expertise
- availability
- a good communicator
- being patient/tolerant
- an ability to build self-confidence, motivation and encouragement
- the ability to be adaptable to student needs
- understanding

This implies that similar qualities are needed in a tutor, no matter what mode of studying a student may be undertaking. The study undertaken by Burge et al (1991) sent questionnaires to 205 tutors involved in distance education at four Canadian institutions to discover what they actually did. A 41% return rate was achieved. It is noted from the study that 66% of the sample tutored on a part-time basis. The commitment of the tutors may be speculated upon as their prime reason for tutoring was financial. The qualities that the tutors thought were important included the knowledge about the subject matter, and their availability. The main function of their tutorial role was in the marking of students' work. Seventy-nine percent had no face-to-face contact with their students. The feedback that the tutor sent to the student about their written work was seen as being important to the students who wanted comments on the content, format and a note of encouragement (75%). The tutors saw the role of the distance-learning tutor as being very important to distance learning. They reported that this role is very different to classroom teaching and that they lacked specific training to cope with the demands. A framework of supportive learning may assist them in this role development.

Research undertaken by Brady in 1976 examined the interaction between the student and tutor in independent learning programmes. Two hundred and seventy-four students and 35 instructors were asked to rate learning situations as either 'ideal' or close to reality. From the results, Brady suggests that students rated their tutors in three different ways and that this rating influenced their satisfaction with the course.

The qualities of the tutor included the following:

- positive, outgoing and supportive,
- neutral, self-contained and non-committal
- negative, socially detached, aloof, non-helpful and unsympathetic

The students who rated their tutors as initiating contact and being positive expressed more satisfaction with the course. This study seemed to suggest that the interaction between the student and the tutor may have a major effect on the learning experience.

One element of the tutors' role is in the giving of feedback for written work submitted by students. Naylor and Cowie's report (1990) addresses this, identifying that the tutors' role in feedback may cause concern in the student. They report that the student may be uncertain about the purpose of detailed feedback that is given to them about their work and that the amount of feedback is a reflection of the quality of the work and the subsequent grade. The tutor has to decide what they are looking for within an assignment so that there is agreement and consensus for the student. The importance of presentation has to be weighted against the content of the work.

Harring-Hendon (1989) offers another dimension to the role of the distance-learning tutor as a promoter of independent learning. Questionnaires were administered to 51 adult students, although there is no rationale for this sample number nor the response rate. The findings suggest that while the majority of students displayed learning readiness characteristics, they were less sure of the process - hence the need for support. She concludes that this has implications for the role of the tutor.

Akinsanya (1992) discusses the individual tutorial as being a useful way of supervising and determining the progression of a student. She states that credibility is an important feature in the tutorial relationship, just as in the role of the educator. She undertook a postal survey with five of the 40 institutions that offer district nursing courses. Twelve questionnaires were sent to each of the five selected institutions and a response rate of 85% was achieved (n=51). A

structured questionnaire was used to gather the information from students. Forty-seven percent had an individualised tutorial system with the majority of respondents rating the tutorial system as either 'very useful' (39%) or 'useful' (52%). Two-thirds preferred private, individualised tutorials. The structured nature of the tutorials added 'value' to them. The personalised tutorial system may enable the tutor and student to be able to work together and increase their knowledge of each other. There was a wish for the tutorial system to be included in the main curriculum. Akinsanya writes *'the tutorial is seen by many district nursing students as a means of contact with their tutor as well as a way of obtaining support in the course of their education'* (1992:308).

Valcke et al (1991:13) recognise the difficulties in correlating the effect of the student-tutor relationship with course success. However, they suggest that *'a friendly experience with their tutor makes a significant contribution to the whole thing'*. The report by Baath and Wangdahl (1976) suggested that when tutors were unable to help the students, students felt that they had no-one to turn to. It could be argued that there is importance in the mutual support received from other students. However, this might not occur within a distance learning course if students do not meet. One aspect that the tutor could develop is the networking between students who are geographically linked.

Another type of support for an isolated student may come from family and friends. Pym's study (1992) discusses the expectations of support from family and colleagues for women distance learners. She asked 2500 nurses about their expectations of their prospective studies although full details were not included. Only 4% of the sample expected no emotional support and 9% expected no practical support. The author contends that from her personal experience, expectation and reality are different as many students become bemused at the lack of family support that actually occurs. She says that *'children seem to adapt better than spouses.....children seem very proud of their student mum'*(p.386). This pattern is also reflected in the response of co-workers when 44.8% expected some support.

Burge et al (1991) investigated the role of the distance learner, asking students about the function of the tutor. A questionnaire was sent to 1040 students who represented 10% of students undertaking distance-learning courses in four Canadian institutions. A response rate of 43% was achieved. The students reported that the lack of contact was a problem for 30% of the students, and 67% identified that tutors were of moderate help to them. The majority of the contact was via the marking of assignments as most of students did not think it acceptable to contact tutors for other reasons. Forty eight percent of the sample wanted to have more contact with their tutors. Despite the 43% response rate, this study showed the potential for the benefits that an organised tutorial system may offer. As shown in the findings of this study, many students wanted to have more contact with their tutors, but felt inhibited to contact them. Perhaps a more organised tutorial system would enable this reluctance to be diminished. The authors of the study conclude that the tutorial support was relatively limited in the areas being researched and they suggested that more interaction would improve the student-tutor relationship.

Holmberg (1981) noted that the face-to-face interaction should not become classroom didactic presentations. However, he supported the notion of residential schools due to their infrequency. In a report examining the use of distance-learning study centres, Dekkers et al (1988) conclude that students prefer having face-to-face contact, both with other students and tutors.

Dillon et al (1989) identified in an evaluative survey of American distance-learning students enrolled in a televised course (n=193) that student interaction was noted as being important by one third of the sample. However, in this study the contact with course tutors was of greater importance and benefit with students reporting the need for understanding by the tutorial staff. The study concludes with a recommendation for the development of counselling skills by tutorial staff. The reliance on tutors rather than other students in this survey may reflect their lack of self-confidence.

However, Burge et al (1991) observe that the tutors perceived themselves as being more important than did the students. This suggests that the tutor has to

be careful about maintaining the balance between creating a supportive environment and creating dependency.

Morgan and Morris (1994) undertook a survey to discover what 54 Open University post-foundation education students felt about their tutorial support in Wales. A structured telephone interview was conducted with 43 of the quota sample (the remaining 11 being contacted by letter). Although there is a distinction within the Open University between the role of the tutor and that of the counsellor (as mentioned by Lentell 1995), this study provides useful qualitative data. Ninety-one percent were satisfied with the tutorial provision. There was a focus on the quality of the contact being as important as the frequency, although the students who were further on in their studies were slightly less satisfied. This suggests the need to keep support on-going throughout a course. Tutorials (which were voluntary) were attended totally by one third of the sample, some were attended by another third and the remaining third attended none. It would have been interesting if the researchers had also reported the gender of those attending the tutorials to see if it coincided with the comparative study undertaken by Kirkup and Von Prümmer (1990) mentioned earlier. The usefulness of tutorials to network with other students was reported and one incident which was described showed that two very remote students had lived near each other, but did not know each other only met at the end of the course. Negative comments were not really elaborated upon in the study, but 15 of the 20 comments identified that the tutorials were dominated by the tutor.

In the second phase of a study undertaken by Benson et al (1991), a stratified sample of 36 distance learning sociology students were interviewed by telephone. The purpose of the study was to examine the experiences of students in relation to distance education and adult learning. A series of nine questions were developed in the interview schedule. Although the details of the response rates and data analysis are not included in the report, information was gathered in connection with student support. The authors note that the

students seemed to be unaware of the availability of support and two-thirds said that they did not require any additional support to the material itself. Half the sample mentioned that they received support from other students. The report mentioned that the students prefer face-to-face tutorials with tutors, with the telephone coming second. In addition, the students wanted more constructive criticism about their written work, which was seen as the main reason for tutor contact.

Another way of obtaining support may be through a system of mentoring. The mentor in distance learning would be in a supportive role, without any assessment or supervisory functions. Abell et al (1995) propose that mentoring and evaluation are not synonymous, also supporting the informal relationship that the mentor and student should have. In an educational setting, a student may choose a mentor from other more senior students, a former student or a colleague. This is similar to the notion of the mentor as a guide (Mills 1991). Lyons et al (1990:277) refers to a mentor as '*a supportive relationship between a neophyte and an older, more experienced guide*'.

However, the age differential may not always be the case in community nurse education with many mature students entering the programme. Bamford and Rose (1992) discuss a mentorship scheme within a modular occupational health nursing programme where the mentor supervises, assesses and guides students. This enables a strong link, they argue, to be made between theory and practice. Jarvis (1992) also discusses the impact that a mentor may have in the practice setting. He defines the term 'mentor' as being interchangeable with 'facilitator' and 'teacher/practitioner'. Within the clinical setting, a mentor may act as a role model, adding to the educational experience (Lyons et al 1990).

At the beginning of a course, a mentor who has previously been a student could help orientate the student to the demands of the course. They would be able to offer empathy to the student, as well as offer guidance and support.

This system may be organised (i.e. the tutor identifies a named mentor) or informal, where the student finds an individual that they know and feels comfortable with. There are potential advantages and disadvantages to both options. On the one hand, a new student may be reluctant to contact another unknown person, but may gain benefit from talking to a person who has already completed the course. Similarly, a person chosen by the individual may not be familiar with the particular course and make suggestions that serve to add to the student's confusion. This does suggest that the mentor may, in practice, have a variety of roles depending on the way the role is interpreted.

In addition, Merriam (1983) points out that because of the multiple definitions of the term, it has not been possible to conceptualise it clearly. For this reason, much of the research may be positively biased. Merriam argues that a mentor may not add any real benefit as the relationship is not level.

Finally, the formal linking of a student to an unknown mentor may prove to be unproductive as it ignores the mutual interaction that is fundamental to the mentoring relationship.

The effectiveness of support within distance education

Following on from the description of support within distance learning and the notion of support from differing perspectives, the effectiveness of such support will now be discussed. It is proposed that the support of a distance learner will be more effective if it is incorporated into a framework of supportive learning designed for the purpose. The models for distance learning currently in existence focus on the prevention of drop-out of distance-learning students. Two such models have been developed by Kember (1989) and Billings (1988). Kember's model (1989) aims to theorise the nature of student drop-out in distance learning although he does state that it could also be used as a way of outlining student progress. There is recognition within Kember's work of the paucity of theoretical underpinning of such work. This model has been developed through theoretical underpinning and empirical work undertaken by Kember.

Seven variables are included in this model in a linear sequence, and there is some similarity to the notion of student support. The variables include individual characteristics of the students in terms of the influences of the student's life. Another variable explores the motivation of the student. The integration of the student within the academic environment is recognised in the next variable. However, while a subset of the academic integration variable entitled 'collective affiliation' refers to the contact between the student and the tutor, this is not the main emphasis of the model. A further variable explores the academic environment which is described as the content of the module. Two further variables identify the importance of the social and working environment of the student and the final variable is called cost benefit analysis. As this is the final variable, if the student works their way through this model, they will end up deciding whether to continue or drop-out, depending on the results of this analysis. A feedback loop suggests that this process may occur throughout the course.

Similarly, the model developed by Billings (1988) adds to the theoretical base of the understanding of causes of student drop-out. Because of its focus on correspondence courses, it implies that there is a lack of face-to-face contact between the student and the tutor. Billings does reflect on the growing literature which suggests that student drop-out is similar in both full-time and distance learning environments. This model has been developed from a theoretical base. It contains seven variables which focus on various factors in a recognised order. The first one is the academic background of the student. This is then followed by an organisational variable which considers the integration of the student with the course and notes the influence of the support of other students. In addition, the other variable associated with the organisational one is the involvement of the employer and family responsibilities that the student has.

The fourth variable is concerned with the goals and aims of the student from enrolment through to the motivation of the student in undertaking the course. It is also concerned with the satisfaction gained from the course structure and content. The next two variables are seen as the next level in the order of the model and include the student's intention to complete the course and the timing of submitting the first assignment. The final variable recognises the process of continuing to study and submit written work throughout the course.

The background factors of the student are considered in both the models mentioned and relate to the student's previous educational experience and their life situation. Both of these issues would be influential within such models. Despite the similarities between these models, it is felt that they do not address the nature of the support that could be offered through the student-tutor relationship to increase the effectiveness of the learning programme.

In addition, it is proposed that there are influences on the development of a supportive model of learning from two nursing models of patient care which focus on the ongoing relationship between the nurse and patient (Peplau 1952, Davis and Oberle 1991) and a developmental model of counselling (Hawkins and Shohet 1989).

The Peplau model of nursing explores the relationship between a nurse and a patient in a therapeutic setting. It recognises a four-stage developmental process which begins with the two individuals meeting as strangers in the 'orientation' phase and moving through a period of growing independence. This involves recognising needs in the 'identification' stage, then developing strategies to meet needs in the 'exploitation' phase and parting at the end of the relationship in the 'resolution' phase. Peplau's work, although written in the 1950s within the field of mental health nursing, has relevance in the 1990s as it considers the development and movement that occurs in a nurse-patient relationship. It also acknowledges the multiple roles that a nurse may play as supporter, educator and facilitator .

Similarly, the Davis and Oberle model of nursing is a developmental model that identifies the stages that a nurse and patient go through during a terminal illness. It was developed through a series of in-depth qualitative interviews with a palliative care nurse. This model shows an orientation phase when the nurse and patient begin to know each other. This is termed as connection. It then demonstrates the variety of roles that a nurse may have with a patient, similar to those outlined in the Peplau model above. In addition, a category identified as 'doing for' is also recognised. There is also a final phase in the model when the nurse and family part following the death of the patient. A central feature of this model is the integrity of the nurse which addresses the support that a nurse working in such an environment needs.

The third influence mentioned is the Hawkins and Shohet model of counselling supervision (1989). It has a developmental base to it, with the client and supervisor moving through four levels from dependence to personal autonomy. In the middle two stages the process of self-development may involve the increasing self-confidence of the client, which is interspersed with uncertainty and dependence.

Therefore, it would appear from the work undertaken in nursing and counselling situations, importance is placed on the development of the 'learner' and the interaction with the 'teacher'. It also raises the notion of the various roles that a 'teacher' may have. This would appear to be an omission in the literature relating to distance learning and such a theoretical model is now suggested.

The supportive model of learning

To begin the development of the supportive model of learning, a concept analysis framework has been used in order to define the term support in this

context. One such framework was developed by Wilson (1963) and is used here as it offers a simplified approach to concept development and has been used previously in nursing settings (Avant 1993). The analysis framework has eleven distinct phases which can be outlined and applied to the support of distance learners. Wilson (1963) did note that it was not always necessary to use all eleven phases. In this instance, however, all the phases are incorporated.

Phase one involves the isolation of the question of the concept. In this context, this question is : **What is the logical nature of student support in distance education?**

The second phase involves addressing the 'right' answer to the question posed about the logical nature of support in distance learning. It is important to outline the central features of the meaning of support. The boundaries of support in this context include guiding, predicting, advising, feeding back, individualising learning by the identification of the factors that may enhance or hinder the student's learning, promoting confidence, empowering and evaluating the experience at the end of the course.

Phases three, four, five and six of the concept analysis involve demonstrating the boundaries of the concept by the demonstration of a model case, a borderline case, a related case and a case that is contrary to the concept. If the concept is difficult to explain from such cases, a seventh phase, the invented case can be used to illustrate the concept.

To illustrate the concept of support in distance education the following model case is presented. A student begins the course without having been in formal education for five years. The student as a result, feels very uncertain of her own abilities and is unsure about the potential demands of the course. By working together with the personal tutor, these issues are discussed when the student and tutor meet as well as during the self-study phase where contact is

maintained by telephone. Gradually the self-confidence of the student increases and the student has a supported learning experience.

A borderline case would involve the student choosing not to enter into discussion with a tutor because they do not feel secure with the tutor. Any feedback that is given to the student is not regarded as being of value or help. In this instance, there is a feeling that the student may need support, but feels a lack of confidence in the tutor.

A related case would encompass the support that nurses offer patients as they come into contact with them. In addition, the health promoting role of the community nurse could be seen as a related issue where the nurse is aiming to increase the self-control that a person has as well as help them to become empowered.

A contrary case would be where there is no contact between the student and the tutor. The student may manage to scrape through the demands of the course, but is left feeling very dissatisfied with their experience as well as feeling very isolated by distance education. The other alternative is that the student drops out of the course without completing it.

The eighth phase of this eleven-stage concept analysis is what is termed the social context. This allows the concept to be explained in its potential setting. In the case of support in distance education, it would be envisaged that it is used in the British higher educational setting by tutors who have the dual role of tutoring and supporting distance-learning students. It could also be extended for use by the supervisors of students who are undertaking clinical placements.

In the ninth phase, any underlying anxieties about the concept are raised. The issue of support within distance education may be seen as preventing the student from developing self-study strategies if the tutor is in too much contact

with the student. This is because the student might become overly-dependent on the tutor inadvertently. In addition, the use of a framework may appear to be restrictive or prescriptive by hard-pressed tutors.

The penultimate phase involves the intended practical results of the application of the concept. It would be hoped that the implementation of support in distance education would enhance the learning experience of the student and enable them to develop their self-learning skills.

In the final phase of the Wilson concept analysis, the final interpretation of the concept of support within distance education would be developed. This, it is proposed, would be finalised following the analysis of the data gathered in the two stages of the research.

Transforming the theory into testable form

Once the concept of support was identified through the analytical steps outlined above, the next phase involved the theorising of the concept of support in distance education into a framework which could be tested in reality through research and practice. This follows the pattern established by Fawcett (1993) who proposes this approach to the development of theory in nursing moving from the exploration of the metaparadigms of nursing, through the philosophical stage to the conceptual model stage; then to the theoretical stage and finally to the testing phase.

While the four metaparadigms of nursing are not relevant here (namely, caring, health, environment, person) four educational metaparadigms are suggested instead in this instance.

They are as follows:

- the student
- the tutor

- the environment
- the course

Each metaparadigm is central to the overarching notion of the educational process. In this example, the student is a mature professional individual who has already obtained a range of experiences and qualifications. The tutor is the link between the institution and the student acting in the role of 'friendly boffin' as described earlier. The educational environment is distance learning while the final metaparadigm addresses the structure and content of the course itself. By identifying these four metaparadigms, the four areas of interest can be outlined (Fawcett, 1993). Furthermore their interrelationships can begin to be explored through the formation of propositions. The first proposition would address the links between the student and the tutor stating that the educational approach is humanistic in that the tutor views the student on an individual basis. The second proposition asserts the interlinking between the educational environment, the course, the student and the tutor. This proposition states that the tutor is concerned with the progress of a student through a distance-learning programme to enable them to have an effective learning programme.

The philosophy of the model of supportive learning being proposed here is:

a framework for the support of adult distance learners should be used in a proactive way to enable students to make the most of their educational experience. It should be flexible to meet the needs of a student group who have very varied educational and professional experiences. Distance education provides an opportunity for the educational growth of both student and tutor over the duration of the student's educational experience.

From the reasoning gathered in the literature on adult learning, distance education and support within distance education, a conceptual scheme emerged as identified by Polit and Hungler (1991) as an inductive approach to

enquiry. This is shown in figure 4.1 which can be found at the end of the chapter as a path model. The variables that it contains are detailed below.

- the relationship between the student and tutor
- student characteristics
- tutor characteristics
- course content
- student progression

The relationship that develops between the student and the tutor is seen to be fundamental to this model. It is based on an individualised approach through regular personal contact, beginning with a face-to face meeting and then using a variety of different media. The ongoing relationship that would develop throughout the course would enable a mutual respect and opportunity for learning to occur. The rationale for a path model without a feedback loop shows the individualised developmental nature of the model.

The student characteristics include the ability to adapt previous learning into the context of higher education and distance learning. This is shown in the research previously discussed by Smithers and Griffin (1986); Marnell and Blanche (1990) ; Thyer and Bazeley (1993) McGivney (1993) as well as in the work of Rogers (1989). This may involve developing confidence to cope with the different educational approach and perceived academic level of the course as reported by Taylor (1985). In addition, a student may have to develop independent learning skills and a close relationship with an academic tutor, both of which may take time to develop.

The tutor variable is concerned with the ways in which he/she may facilitate student learning. This includes being helpful, being knowledgeable about the subject or being able to refer the student to another academic where relevant. The work of Bevis (Watson 1989) is relevant to this issue as discussed earlier. The development of proactive abilities by initiating contact with the student

during the distance learning phase of the course and anticipating any difficulties that the student may have is evidenced in the work of Nation (1993), Brackenreg (1991) and Collett et al (1987). The tutor also needs to be adaptable, available, credible, friendly and be able to accept constructive criticism.

The course content addresses informing students about the structure and content of the course they are undertaking as well as promoting the development of transferable skills by offering detailed feed-back on written work.

The student progression variable shows the need for the student to be informed throughout the length of their studies about how they can be helped to manage their learning. This reflects the work undertaken by Brady (1976), Burge et al (1991) and Naylor and Cowie (1990). This would begin with pre-course information about distance learning; the joint planning of the individual programme of studies; and enabling contact to be made with other students.

Figure 4.1 shows the interlinking of these variables and the path towards the final outcome which is shown in the 'effective learning experience' category. While there would be an initial assessment undertaken by the student about their abilities, the concept of support would continue throughout the duration of the programme of studies. This would mean that three distinct phases would emerge within the supportive learning framework.

Phase one is the 'meeting' phase. This is when the links are made between the student and the tutor while the student is becoming familiar with the notion of being a student once more. Learning needs can be assessed at this stage and expectations discussed. With the provision of a personal tutorial, and the offer of continuing links while the student is completing their self-study material, the working relationship between the student and the tutor can begin. There may be some uncertainty within the mind of the student and the tutor can be involved in guiding and supporting the student at this stage. One of the main

factors that has to develop is the trust between the student and the tutor. Peplau (1952) suggests that the way in which people feel about asking for help is dependent on how they see themselves and how they think they should be in that situation. For the student who has been used to a more formal educational setting, they may expect the tutor to be more formal and remote. The participation and involvement of both the student and the tutor in goal-setting is one approach to the formation of such a trusting relationship. Another way is to provide the student with constructive feedback on any written work.

It is a possibility that the tutor may be creating a notion of dependency in the student during this phase, mistakenly assuming that they are helping the student. An analogy to this would be the nurse who continues to dress a patient instead of teaching the patient how to do it themselves. Although the patient may take longer, the sense of achievement would be greater for the patient if they have accomplished such a skill themselves. This is similar to the 'helping' of a student with their course-work. Within the sphere of counselling, Hawkins and Shohet(1989) allude to a similar difficulty when they say that it is very difficult to remain as the 'vehicle' in the counselling relationship and not become totally immersed in it.

The second phase of the model has been called the 'guiding phase'. As the student progresses through the course, there are opportunities for the student-tutor relationship to develop as they meet during the core weeks. This has been shown to be of importance within distance education. As tutors mark and return work, an opportunity to discuss ongoing issues, both course and work-related are increased. The tutor's role is that of guide at this stage, encouraging and 'being there' as an ear on the end of the phone or fax machine. This highlights the need for a trusting relationship so that the student can approach the tutor without feeling that they are being a burden or that they are 'bothering the tutor'. As the student progresses through the course, the tutor may witness the student trying to cope with the highlights and frustrations of part-time study. At the end of this second phase of the model, the student

may be beginning to make progress towards independent learning. A similarity exists between this stage of the model and that of the counselling relationship as discussed by Hawkins and Shohet(1989). They suggest that there is a phase within counselling which is likened to adolescence where the tutor may get the blame for the muddling of views that may occur within the student.

The third and final phase of the model has been called the 'moving on' phase. At the end of the course, there has to be a parting of the student and tutor. If the relationship has become close over the length of the course, this may prove to be a mixed parting for both the student and the tutor. It would seem to be important to acknowledge this and the mutual learning that has taken place.

Summary

As has been shown in this chapter, the support that can be offered to a distance-learning student may enhance their educational experience. This adds to the definition of effectiveness within this research project. The definition of student support has been shown to be challenging and wide-ranging. Ultimately, the question remains whether support in distance education is a good thing. If, as in this chapter, support is taken to mean the attention to the individual learner's educational needs so that they are not isolated in their learning, then it is a good thing. If, however, it stifles the creativity of the learner or creates a state of dependency on the tutor, then support could be as harmful as the distance learner who feels totally isolated.

The conceptual framework that is described in this chapter was based on the literature reviewed in this and previous chapters. The two subsequent stages of the research undertaken with students will help to determine how effective such a model of supportive learning may be as an educational aid to the distance learner.

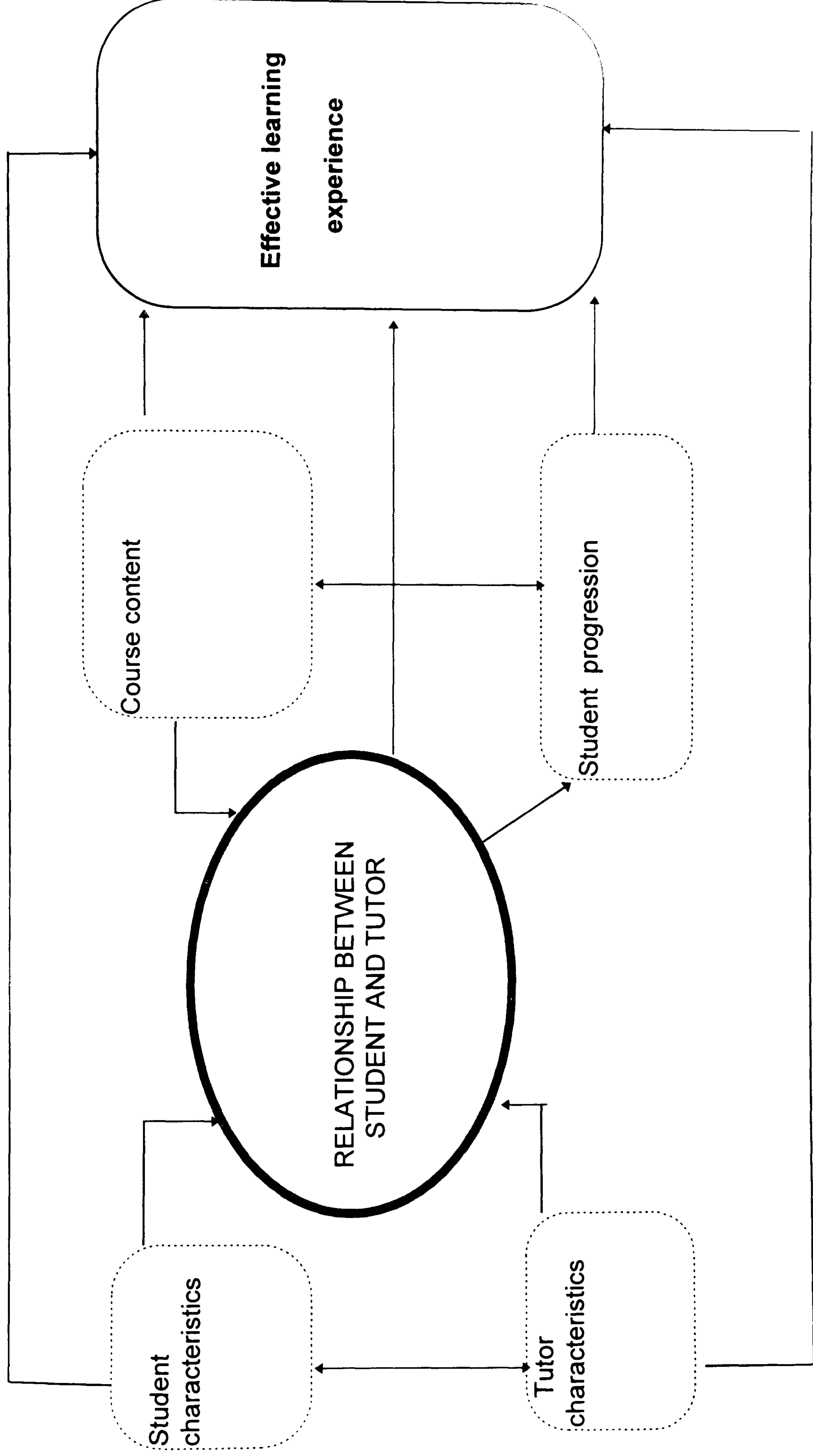


FIGURE 4.1 A model for supportive learning in distance education

CHAPTER FIVE : RESEARCH DESIGN

Introduction

The introductory chapters have shown that adult learners have a range of educational needs, particularly on entry to higher education. Mezirow (1978), Rogers (1989) and Hayes (1990) are among the commentators on the disorientating effect an adult student may experience. As distance learning tends to be developed for adult students, this research project aims to investigate the effectiveness of distance learning from the students' perspective. As there is such a growth in the provision of flexible approaches to education, it would appear imperative to assess the effectiveness of such innovative modes of course delivery.

This research seeks to investigate whether the learning needs of distance learners are similar to other adult students in full-time higher education. Previous research reported by Smithers and Griffin (1986), Marnell and Blanche (1990) and Thyer and Bazely (1993), suggests that students may need support with the demands of academic work. This comparative type of research examining the learning needs of students will add to the theory of adult education within higher education. Only two comparative studies between full-time and distance-learning students have been found in the literature (Kahl and Cropley, (1986) and Köymen 1992). In addition, it will add to the literature base of distance learning, which is a relatively new mode of course delivery in community nurse education. Within the research setting that was investigated, a unique opportunity for a comparative study within community nurse education was presented because of the the three community specialties available for study, namely district nursing (DN), health visiting (HV) and occupational health nursing (OH). This latter specialty was available for study by distance learning, unlike the other two which could only be studied on a full-time basis. No references have been found to similar research within community nurse education settings.

A further consideration of the research is to explore the support of distance-learning students. This would be developed from the findings of the comparative study. The chapter on support in distance-learning indicates that the support needs

of distance learners may be complex. Previous studies have described approaches to course completion (Billings 1988) or the prevention of student drop-out (Kember 1989), but no empirical work has been found that addresses the nature of the student-tutor relationship within distance-learning. It would appear that the experience of distance learning within nurse education remains to be explored. The literature suggests that support may add to the effectiveness of an educational programme (Benson et al 1991, Morgan and Morris 1994).

Research Design

This investigation enables the experiences of the student on a distance-learning course to be described. This may show how adult learners react to the learning environment throughout a course as well as explore whether progress is made towards self-directed learning.

This research also enables the role of the tutor to be discussed to discover how tutors react to students who approach them for 'help'. This will enable an analysis to be made of the effectiveness of teaching and supportive interventions within distance learning. As noted in the chapter on support, there appears to have been little preparation for tutors working in the speciality of distance-learning (Burge et al 1991).

In addition, the nature of the professional qualification that is sought within community nurse education involves the student working alongside a community mentor. This research will enable the role of the community supervisor within distance learning settings to be defined and predicted for the future.

In order for the research methods to be designed, the objectives were set following the literature review.

The objectives of the study are to :

- Identify the educational support needed by students who undertook a full-time or distance learning diploma in occupational health nursing, district nursing or health visiting.
- Analyse the support which met the students' identified learning needs.

- Identify the study skills guidance required by the students undertaking a diploma level course in occupational health nursing, district nursing or health visiting.
- Identify the guidance on study skills offered to the students undertaking a full-time or distance-learning diploma in occupational health nursing, district nursing or health visiting.
- Critically compare whether full-time and distance-learning students identified similar learning and study-skills needs.
- Determine whether the extent of previous academic study is associated with the amount of educational support needed during either a full-time or distance-learning course.
- Explore the experience and the educational needs of the distance learning graduates
- Identify the qualities and the role of the community supervisor
- Explore the educational needs of the community supervisor
- Evaluate the overall effectiveness of the community supervisory role within the distance learning course itself
- Evaluate the effectiveness of the distance-learning course

The first six objectives appear to fit a quantitative paradigm, whereas the remaining five objectives are more qualitative in nature. There is a realisation that no single answer or truth is being sought in this research, as well as a recognition of the closeness of the author to the subject under investigation. This lends support to the use of a more qualitative paradigm which has strong links to a humanistic philosophy as described by Rogers (1978) and Peplau (1952) earlier. This means that the researcher and the respondents have equal status within the research. Therefore, a fixed survey-type approach is followed by a more inductive approach and to achieve this, the research has been designed in two stages. This approach to mixed method research is identified by Creswell (1994) as one that uses two research paradigms separately.

Polgar and Thomas (1993) justify the use of a mixed methodology approach where subjective experiences are being investigated, as in this research project. In

addition, Najman et al (1992) would support such a mixed approach for theory-generation, rather than theory-testing. However, as Henwood and Pidgeon (1993) comment, there is still controversy about the nature of the qualitative versus quantitative methodology.

The mixed methodology debate is discussed by Creswell (1994). He argues that there are three attitudes towards this issue. The first attitude is one of keeping methods separate, which Creswell calls the 'purist' attitude. Secondly, there are the 'situationalists' who would consider that the methodology should be mixed in appropriate situations. Finally, there are the 'pragmatists', who favour integration of the methods. In this study, the situationalist view is adopted as it enables a quantitative approach to be used to gather a breadth of data in a comparative way. This is then followed by a qualitative approach to be used to gather a depth of data about the lived experience of distance learning.

Stenhouse (1988) notes that a more qualitative approach may be useful due to the complexities of education and the influence of extraneous variables, which would make the quantitative approach less suitable in the second phase of the research. However, no matter whether a quantitative or qualitative approach is used, a research framework has been designed to ensure academic rigour is maintained. This mixed approach is used in addition to the triangulation that occurs in the combination of research approaches. Triangulation can be justified so that the complementary strengths of each research approach can be used to off-set the weaknesses. Further support for this is confirmed in nursing research by Carter (1992:45) who writes, *'there are many situations where both the qualitative and quantitative approaches can be used in a single study, each approach serving to complement the other and each generating different kinds of knowledge that will be useful in practice'*. Knafl and Breitmayer (1991) add that it can be used to add to the completeness of the data gathered. A research design that incorporates triangulation is appropriate in educational research according to Denzin (in Keeves 1988) because of the ever-changing nature of the situation under investigation and the fact that no single approach would encompass this environment.

The use of a mixed approach to research design using a process of sequential triangulation (Creswell 1994) occurs when the findings of the first phase of the study will determine the second stage. Triangulation can add to the confirmability of a research study's findings according to Knafl and Breitmayer (1991).

In this research, the literature review provides the detailed framework for the survey in the quantitative phase. This then offers a more general framework for the qualitative phase. Although the literature is often not reviewed until the data are gathered in qualitative research, Creswell (1994) offers a justification for including the literature review as a guiding framework, if needed.

The first stage of the research

As the approach in the first part of the research is to describe and compare a group of full-time and distance-learning students, a non-experimental, cross-sectional descriptive design is planned. This is supported by Fink (1995) who notes that this approach is justified to obtain a picture of a group at a particular time. Rosier (in Keeves 1988) also recognises the utility of surveys in educational research when important issues need to be 'illuminated'. The objectives set for the study do not lend themselves to the use of an experimental approach as there is no control group. As this is a retrospective study, a longitudinal design as used by Beaty and Morgan (1992) and Taylor (1985) would not be suitable.

As the research is being undertaken within a small department of nursing, the whole target population are included in the survey. This should increase the internal validity of the study (Fink 1995). Clemens-Johnson (1977) notes that *'If a population is small and costs are reasonable, the investigator may be able to study the entire population. In this case, there would be no sampling problem, nor would there be a problem of statistical inference. Data would be free of sampling errors'*(p.141).

The inclusion of the three community specialities is warranted to give an adequate comparison between distance learning and full-time students. All the participants are post-registration nurses, fit the criteria of being adult learners as defined earlier and all shared the same goal of studying for a vocational community nursing qualification. However, it is acknowledged that the individual courses had different syllabi, and there was no joint teaching on the courses, other than in the first term of the full-time district nursing and health visiting course. Any tutorial support that was given was not only individual to the particular course, but also to the particular tutor.

The data collection method is by an original semi-structured anonymous postal questionnaire. The use of questionnaires for data-gathering was used in the research studies reported earlier by Kahl and Cropley (1986), Smithers and Griffin (1986), Köymen (1992), Bernt and Bugbee (1993) and Thyer and Bazely (1993). The target population had recently been students and were known to be literate, therefore a postal questionnaire would be a suitable way of gathering data. The data gathering tool would meet the three assumptions noted by Wolf (in Keeves 1988). They are:

- the understanding by the sample population of the questions being asked.
- The reasons for inclusion in the survey
- The final assumption is that the respondents would be willing to answer questions honestly.

In order to achieve the first two assumptions, the survey instrument would be enclosed together so that all the information that the potential respondent needed was enclosed in the one letter. It is argued that the final assumption is difficult to prove, but it is hoped that if there is understanding about the purpose of the research, then respondents would endeavour to answer as honestly as they could.

Fowler (1993) confirms this approach when he notes that a sample population having these characteristics outlined above makes the use of a postal questionnaire feasible. The use of a postal survey rather than interview was

decided upon due to the widespread geographical location of the students and the potential cost implications of contacting the population by telephone or face-to-face. Clemens-Johnson(1977) noted '*questionnaires may be used to learn about the opinions and attitudes of respondents, activities they engage in, past experiences and future plans*' (p.151).

However, it is also noted that the use of an anonymous questionnaire may result in the response of only those students who are interested in the topic. The use of an anonymous questionnaire can lead to a poor response rate. It means that those who had just mislaid or forgotten to respond are missed as well as those who possibly may have had reason not to respond (e.g. if they were very dissatisfied with the course). A response rate of 70% was aimed for. Fowler(1993) contends this level of response to be more than acceptable when using an anonymous data gathering instrument. Additionally, Polit and Hungler (1995) assert that a response rate of more than 60% is adequate in most cases.

The reliability of self-reporting as a means of data collection has been questioned by Graziano and Raulin (1993). In this instance, it is recognised that the reliability could be questioned because of the retrospective nature of the subject. In support of such an approach, Najman et al (1992) comment that '*anonymous forms of data collection may produce more valid results*' Treece and Treece (1982) comment that the researcher may have to acknowledge that the recall may be biased. Yow(1994) points out that information about a subject will be retained if it is important or has a lasting impact due to the strength of emotion that it causes. Yow also argues that it is the trivial events of daily life that tend to be forgotten. Overall, it is acknowledged by the researcher that the passage of time may cause some distortion in the recall of the potential respondents.

The second stage of the research

The overall aim of this stage of the research is to build upon the issues raised in the first part in order to gain further understanding of the nature of distance education from three differing and important perspectives, i.e. the first six

graduates; their community supervisors and the academic staff directly involved with the course.

In deciding on a suitable approach to determine the effectiveness of distance learning, a phenomenological approach has been decided upon in order to engage in an interpretative focus on the human field of activity (Crabtree and Miller 1992). This type of enquiry will enable a greater depth to be achieved than was possible in the earlier survey. Stenhouse(1988) notes that a more qualitative approach may be useful due to the complexities of education and the influence of extraneous variables, which would make the quantitative approach less suitable at this stage of the research. This phenomenological approach is justified as it reflects the varying views of the intended sample and the fact that a 'single truth' is not sought.

This interest in respondent experiences is defined as aesthetic knowledge by Streubert and Carpenter (1995). They report that such knowledge is fundamental to the art of nursing because it enables individual needs to be met. This is also applicable in the educational setting. In addition, a qualitative approach acknowledges the concept of constructed reality which means that a situation is real to the person experiencing it. In support of this approach, Beck (1994) contends that the use of phenomenology is congruent with the humanistic philosophy of nursing. This, it is argued, can be extended to the educational approach being developed in the supportive model of learning.

Three main approaches to phenomenology have been identified according to Beck (1994) by Colaizzi, Giorgi and Van Kaam, although some researchers follow a more general approach as in this case. It would appear that whatever approach is used, the need for thoroughness is vital to ensure credibility.

Stenhouse (1988:50) reports that in a qualitative study, *'there is no need for random sampling as the external validity hinges on judgmental comparison or the generation of theory rather than on calculations that premise randomness'*. A balance was made in this qualitative approach in the appropriateness of the

sample, rather than in the quantity of it. Morse (1991) writes that the main criterion is to focus on those respondents who will be able to explain the realities of the experience openly to the researcher and for that reason, a purposeful sample was chosen. Those key individuals who reflected the needs of the aims of the study were identified, namely the first six graduates of the BA in Community Health Nursing course; the seven academic staff involved with the course and the nine community supervisors/mentors who were involved in the practical component in 1993/94. It was suggested by Crabtree and Miller (1992:141) that *'experience has shown that 6-8 data sources or sampling units will often suffice for a homogenous sample'*.

In support of this reasoning, personal interviews were chosen so that information could be gathered from the graduates who completed the course, their community supervisors and academic colleagues involved with the distance learning course. The interviews assisted in determining the special demands of the distance learner and the support they needed in both the theoretical and practical components of their course. The data gathered from these interviews would help in the refinement of the model of supportive learning as outlined in an earlier chapter.

The interviews aim to 'describe and interpret' the experiences of the graduates, academic colleagues and their community supervisors, rather than measure them (Morgan 1991). This approach, which is described by Stenhouse (1988) as evaluative, would assist in the critical judgement of the effectiveness of the programme of study undertaken by the graduates. This makes it a suitable approach to meet the overall objectives of the second stage of the project.

Rutman (1984) proposes four elements to be considered when gathering qualitative data which are applied in this context. The first one is to be close enough to the respondents and the situation being investigated to understand the depth and details of what was going on. This should readily be achieved by the investigator's close involvement with the course, community supervisors and graduates. Then there is a need to capture the reality of the situation, followed by

the detailed reporting of events and interactions. The final element is the transcription and analysis process.

Clemens-Johnson (1977) notes that the interview approach is suitable when detailed information was to be collected about a few subjects. However, because of the range of information that was being sought, different interview strategies are proposed to enable relevant data to emerge from the interview material. This supports the proposition that *'inductive reasoning used in interpretative approaches in the social sciences allows propositions or hypotheses to emerge from careful observations'* (Powney and Watts 1987:3).

Polit and Hungler(1991) also report that a higher response rate occurs when using interviews. The interview approach has been identified as belonging to the 'self-reporting' mode of study. Polit and Hungler (1991:296) say *'the self-report method is strong with respect to its directness and versatility, but the major drawback is the potential for deliberate or unconscious distortion on the part of the respondent'*. This argument applies in both stages of the research project. In an interview, Dexter (1970) questions the reliability of interviewee comments, and the ability of the interviewer to determine whether he/she is being told the truth. If another student was asking the questions, the answers given might be different. Additionally, it was recognised that in this study, the data being gathered are retrospective. As noted by Dexter (1970:120), *'the informant's statements represent merely the perception of the informant, filtered and modified by his cognitive and emotional reactions and reported through personal verbal usage'*.

Within each interview approach, the objectives are kept in focus, so that meaningful data can be obtained. During each interview, it is attempted to bracket out personal feelings about distance learning . Bracketing is defined by Streubert and Carpenter (1995) as the process of not making judgements about the emerging data, based on personal knowledge or beliefs. By being sensitive to this process, the participants can be enabled to speak freely. As this is an inductive

approach, some research questions are formulated at the start to enable the main focus of the study to be identified (Miles and Huberman 1994:25).

There are two perspectives ongoing in this study according to Powney and Watts (1987). The first perspective is 'matter of fact' which focuses on the closed-type questions used with the community supervisors. The second-order perspective is described as, '*the focus of research upon the experience of learning as it appears to participants*' (Powney and Watts 1987). This relates more to the open, less structured graduate and academic colleague interviews.

There are issues of bias, reliability, and validity to be considered in this type of research approach as with the survey approach used earlier. General issues are addressed in this chapter, with more specific points being noted in the next chapter.

The sample is biased due to its purposeful nature, but as Morse (1991:138) exclaimed, '*it is meant to be. Bias is used positively to facilitate the research*'. The problem of bias is apparent when the interviewer is well-known to the respondents. Powney and Watts (1987) indicate that by informing the interviewees about the purpose of the research, such bias can be lessened.

To increase the reliability, the interview schedules that are devised ensure that each interviewee is asked the same questions in the same order. Even though there is only one interviewer, it is still necessary for a research framework to be drawn up so that each interview is consistent (Powney and Watts 1987). The advantage of having only one interviewer means that consistency and flexibility are maintained throughout the two stages of the research.

As Fowler notes (1993:80) when writing about validity, it can be extremely difficult to validate opinions and feelings. In this case, the researcher endeavoured to make the questions as clear as possible to promote validity. One approach to strengthen the validity of the responses was to ask the graduates afterwards if the

written version of the interviews represents reality to them (Morgan 1991). In qualitative research, the process of validity has been referred to as credibility by Streubert and Carpenter (1995). They also note that dependability is the equivalent term used for reliability.

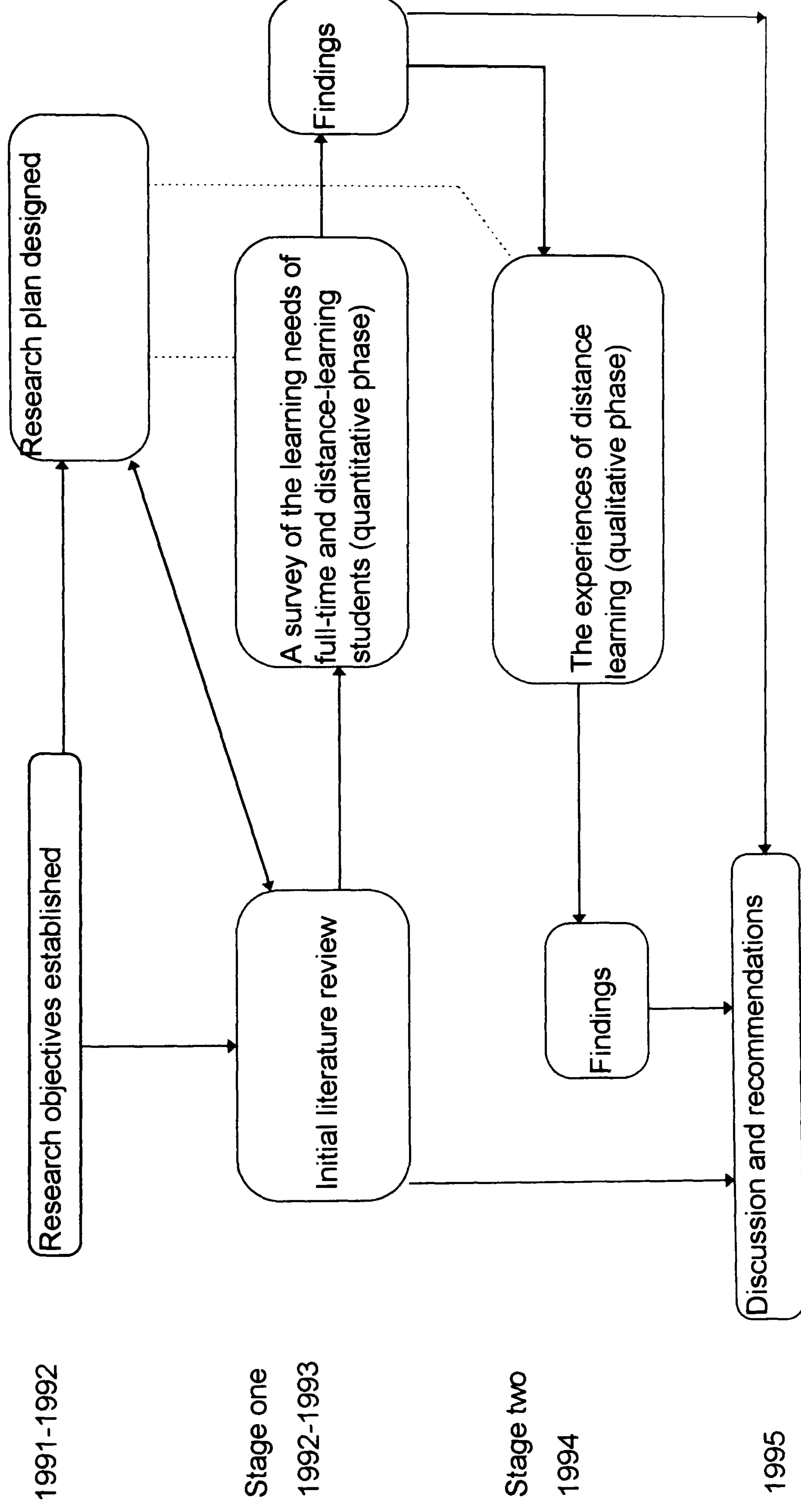
Similarly, ethical consideration is given to the type of questions that are asked and the notion of ownership of the data in both stages of the research. As May notes, (1991) attention is given to the balance which is kept between the researcher's aims and the needs of the respondent. It was made clear to all the participants in the two stages of the research that they would not be identified by their responses. Additionally, reassurance is given to the respondents that any information given is confidential to the research. It was hoped that this assurance would lessen the need for the graduate to answer in the way that they thought the researcher would expect. One advantage of knowing the graduate respondents well, however, is the opportunity for the graduate to be honest trusting that such information would not be used against them in any way. This is why graduates were approached rather than students undertaking the course. It is considered important that the potential for harm, however slight, was accounted for in the research, showing the need to bracket out personal feelings about the course.

Consideration is given to the sequencing of interviews. Due to the progressive nature of the qualitative approach from unstructured to structured as noted by May (1991), it is intended, where possible, to undertake the graduate interviews first. It is recognised that despite thorough planning, the actual content of the interviews may evolve at the implementation stage as commented by May (1991:190) when she says, '*plans for who will be interviewed, when, about what and in what level of detail are outlined at the proposal stage, but such decisions must be evaluated and changed as data are examined and analysed*'. This reflects the qualitative nature of the study which allows the data to emerge from the interview situation, rather than the theory-testing approach.

Summary

This chapter has outlined the research design of this project. It has shown that two stages of research have been identified. Although the overall focus of the research project is examining the effectiveness of distance learning, the learning experiences of full-time as well as distance-learning students were compared to add to the knowledge of learning effectiveness. The first stage aims to compare the learning and support needs of a group of full-time and distance-learning students. The findings of this survey will help in the final development of the interviews that will be carried out in the second stage. The second stage explores the experiences of distance-learning students. The overall design can be seen illustrated in figure 5.1 below. The results of the two stages are presented in the following chapters.

FIGURE 5.1 RESEARCH PLAN



CHAPTER SIX : A COMPARATIVE SURVEY OF THE LEARNING NEEDS OF ADULT LEARNERS

Introduction

The aim of the survey was to determine the amount of learning support that an adult learner may require while undertaking a full-time or distance-learning course as well as to compare any differences between a group of full-time and distance learners. This chapter presents the method and findings of this survey.

Method

The target population consisted of 179 former students who completed a diploma level course in a specialism within community nursing at an Institute of Technology between 1990-1992, either by a full-time or distance learning route. Their addresses were obtained from records held within the Department of Nursing with the approval of the Head of Department. This population was sampled in totality to gain an adequate sample for data analysis and to obtain data from two independent groups who were undertaking diploma-level nursing courses either by full-time or distance learning study.

In the design of the survey tool, issues of reliability and validity were considered. Strategies to increase the reliability of the data gathering tool included the format of the questionnaire. Every student was sent an identical questionnaire to complete. All the questions were written out in full in simple terms to make them as clear as possible. The questionnaire was piloted before being sent to the main sample. As discussed in the chapter on research design, the anonymity of the questionnaire encouraged the respondents to give honest answers and be more critical.

Issues of validity were considered in the design of the questionnaire. It was realised that there may well be limited external validity from the results of this study as students from other institutions were not eligible for inclusion. Face-validity was addressed by making the questions as unambiguous as possible. As the questionnaire was anonymous, the validity of the student response could not be

measured accurately. There was also a possibility of misinterpretation of the questions because the researcher would not be present to check any lack of understanding that the respondent might have. In addition, there was a potential for answers to be given that the respondent thought the researcher was looking for. The questionnaire was discussed with a colleague pre-application to assess its face-validity. It was agreed that the questions would elicit the information required to meet the set objectives. The questionnaire itself (ref. Appendix II) was structured, being composed of a combination of open and closed questions. It was designed to funnel the student to provide general information about the course they had undertaken, followed by their studying support needs and support received during their particular course (Barker 1992). The questionnaire itself was spaciouly laid out to allow room for the open question responses and to make it appear 'user-friendly'.

To improve the potential return-rate a stamped addressed envelope and covering personal letter was included. This enabled the student to make an informed decision whether or not to participate in the study. The covering letter outlined the purpose of the study and ensured the anonymity of the respondents.

The eleven closed questions comprised of a variety of tick-box answers; yes/no answers and Likert scales. Three open questions were also included. Polgar and Thomas (1991) note that 'structured data collection methods are most likely to control data distortion and interviewer bias'. Open questions may prove to be difficult to process and analyse, but more detail can be obtained from those questions. However, it has to be acknowledged that there is a potential for interviewer-bias when interpreting responses to open questions. Not all writers on research methods would agree with the use of open questions in self-completed questionnaires. Fowler(1993) points out that in many cases, such open questions are unlikely to provide any useful data, because there is no opportunity to clarify any issues with the respondent. Despite this view, it was felt that the opinions of the sample would offer useful data because they would be knowledgeable about the subject. Only three open questions are included in the survey.

The final phraseology of the questionnaire, which was determined after the pilot study was completed, is now presented.

Question 1a. Please indicate the area of specialism asked the participants to identify their area of specialism in order to establish their particular specialty. This was important as the questionnaire was anonymous. The students were asked to select their speciality from the three categories.

Question 1b Please indicate whether any of the following qualifications in addition to your RGN were held at the beginning of the course. The reason for asking this was to gather data on the post-basic educational experience of the students at the start of the course. Students are asked to tick the appropriate category from a range.

Question 1c asked the students to identify whether they were full-time or distance learning students. This was asked as the questionnaire is anonymous. Students were asked to make a choice between two categories.

Having established the areas of specialism and how the course was completed, the questionnaire moved on to the subject of attitudes towards perceived studying abilities at the start of a course.

Question 2a gave the students an introduction to this by asking them to agree or disagree with the following statement: *“Some people feel unsure of their studying abilities at the start of an academic course”*. They were asked whether they agreed with this statement. This general statement was written to funnel the respondents into thinking about studying abilities at the start of a course generally. In the second part of this question, *they were then asked to describe, briefly, how they felt at the start of their particular course presenting the first of the open questions.*

Question 2b Please indicate whether any of the following studying supports were required at the start of the course asked the students to indicate whether they felt that they needed any studying support at the start of their course. Five categories

were offered to the student, plus additional space for the student to identify any other areas of possible studying support.

Question 2c Please indicate who met the studying support needs during the course.

Five categories were given as possible alternatives, with space for the individual respondent to add to the list.

Question 2d What was thought of the formal guidance given during the course relating to study skills? This question was asked in order to move the students on to a new topic i.e. that of the actual tutorial guidance that they received during their diploma-level course. A Likert-type scale with four possible responses was presented.

The questionnaire then addressed the topic of how often tutorial support was offered during the courses undertaken by the students. *Question 3a asked whether tutorials were offered on a regular basis during the course or whether they were offered only when requested by the individual student.* Students were offered a choice of two options to this question.

Question 3b identified whether the tutorials were held on a face-to-face basis or by the telephone tutorial system. Students were asked to select the appropriate response from a choice of two categories.

Question 3c -the second open question, allowed the student to describe, briefly, in their own words whether the tutorial system offered to them in their course helped them in their study. The final three questions were intended to obtain the overall satisfaction of the students with the experience that they had on the particular course they undertook. *Question 3d asked them to rate on a 5-point Likert scale, their satisfaction with the learning experience they had on the course.*

Question 3e asked them to rate on a similar Likert scale the amount of knowledge they thought they had gained on the course.

The last question 3f was the final open question and allowed the student to give their opinion of how their learning could have been enhanced during the course that they undertook.

The questionnaire was distributed in pilot-form to eighteen part-time adult students undertaking a post-basic course not linked to the study. The approach to this course for the pilot phase of the questionnaire was acceptable as none of these students would be approached in the main study, although a few students were diplomates from the occupational health nursing course by distance learning.

These students were chosen as they shared some of the characteristics of the student group who would be approached in the main study i.e. they were all registered nurses and were undertaking a part-time nursing course. However, they were not studying for an additional professional qualification on this course and unlike the respondents in the main study, had recently begun their course.

A covering letter was enclosed explaining the purpose of the study that was to take place with the community nursing students. The letter also ensured their anonymity and reassured them that permission to approach them had been obtained from their course leader. To encourage the return of the questionnaires, a stamped-addressed envelope was also enclosed and the students were asked to return the questionnaire to the Department of Nursing by a specific date. The students undertaking the pilot questionnaire were asked to comment on its design and content.

Twelve responses arrived within the specified period and the following issues were raised. The twelve students worked in a range of specialisms within nursing and also demonstrated a range of previous educational experience. Three students indicated that they held a certificate-level qualification, and 8 students indicated that they held a diploma-level qualification. Two students indicated that they held both certificate and diploma-level qualifications and one student indicated that they held both a certificate-level qualification and a degree.

Eleven respondents agreed with the statement 'some people feel unsure of their studying abilities at the start of an academic course' completely and one respondent agreed that it may be true sometimes.

The students then went on to describe how they felt about their studying abilities at the start of their course. One student felt confident about his/her studying abilities (this was the student who held a previous degree). Two students highlighted worries in more than one area. These can be summarised into four distinct categories. Three students identified how studying would fit in with other commitments, with 2 students wondering about their ability to organise their time. Three students were unsure about studying after a gap since any studying was done. Six commented on their ability to study and complete work at degree level. One student added that he/she was worried as an assignment had been graded as fail on a previous course.

The possible studying supports needed by the students were identified in five categories, with a space available to record any identified by the student themselves. Five students chose the category called 'general support'. Three did not identify any category. Two students chose 'reading skills'. 'Study pattern' and 'essay writing' were both identified by one student. No-one chose the category called 'prioritising course work'.

Four students identified more than one category in response to being asked who met their studying support needs. The 'course tutor' and a 'family member' were chosen by 4 students. Three students identified the 'subject specialist'. The categories entitled 'no-one' and 'another student' were selected by two students each. One student identified their 'nurse manager' and another student highlighted the category called 'other'.

Nine students replied that no formal guidance about studying skills was given at the start of their course, one felt that the guidance was 'worthless', and 2 identified that the guidance had been 'helpful'.

Students were then asked three questions relating to the tutorial structure offered to them during their course. Seven students said that tutorials were held on a regular basis, 4 said that tutorials were only offered when requested by the student and one student did not answer the question.

Nine students replied that tutorials were offered on a face-to-face basis and 2 identified that tutorials were offered by telephone. One student said that both face-to-face and telephone tutorials had been offered and one student did not answer the question.

Three students did not answer the question about whether the tutorial system offered assisted in the progression of study. One student said "No!" and the answers of the remaining 8 students can be categorised within the following 5 sections:

- 2 said that they had not used the tutorial system
- one said that it did not help with the progression of study, but did keep them on the "straight and narrow"
- 2 students felt that it was too early to say
- one student said that it did help them with their progression of study
- 2 students said that it helped for general study, which they felt was different to the progression of their studies.

The responses to the pilot questionnaire identified some small problems with the construction of the questionnaire itself. The first question asked the students where they were based. This caused a difficulty for the student who was based in both the hospital and community setting. It was anticipated that this would not cause a problem in the main questionnaire because the students would be asked the name of the specialism they were studying for.

Question 1b. regarding academic qualifications was not specific enough as students did not know whether nursing qualifications counted or not. The graduate

did not highlight his/her degree result in this section either. In the main questionnaire, the phrase '*in addition to your RGN*' was added.

The answers 'yes', 'no' and 'sometimes' to question 2a did not match the question 'would you agree or disagree with this statement?' This was changed to 'agree, disagree or sometimes' in the main questionnaire.

The term 'progression of study' was found to be too vague in question 3c. as some students saw progression of study being different to general study skills.

Despite these difficulties, the data gathered from the pilot phase indicated that the data collection tool had validity and that with the minor amendments outlined above, the questionnaire was ready to be sent to the main sample. In addition, the gathering of results from the pilot phase allowed the design of appropriate ways of presenting the results from the main study.

At the design stage, a PC-based statistical package (SPSS for Windows) was prepared for use in the data analysis. Within the framework of the six stated objectives, similarities or differences between full-time and distance learning students undertaking a diploma-level community nursing course were determined in the following areas:

- studying needs at the start of a course
- the main people providing support to the students during their course
- their overall satisfaction with the course they undertook

Chi-square tests were identified as a relevant statistical test to use in the analysis of these nominal data.

The qualitative data gathered from the open questions was examined using an adaptation of Turner's framework (Pollock 1992:297). This material would enable illumination of the study's results. However, it was recognised that categorisation has a potential weakness in the individual interpretation by the researcher.

Results

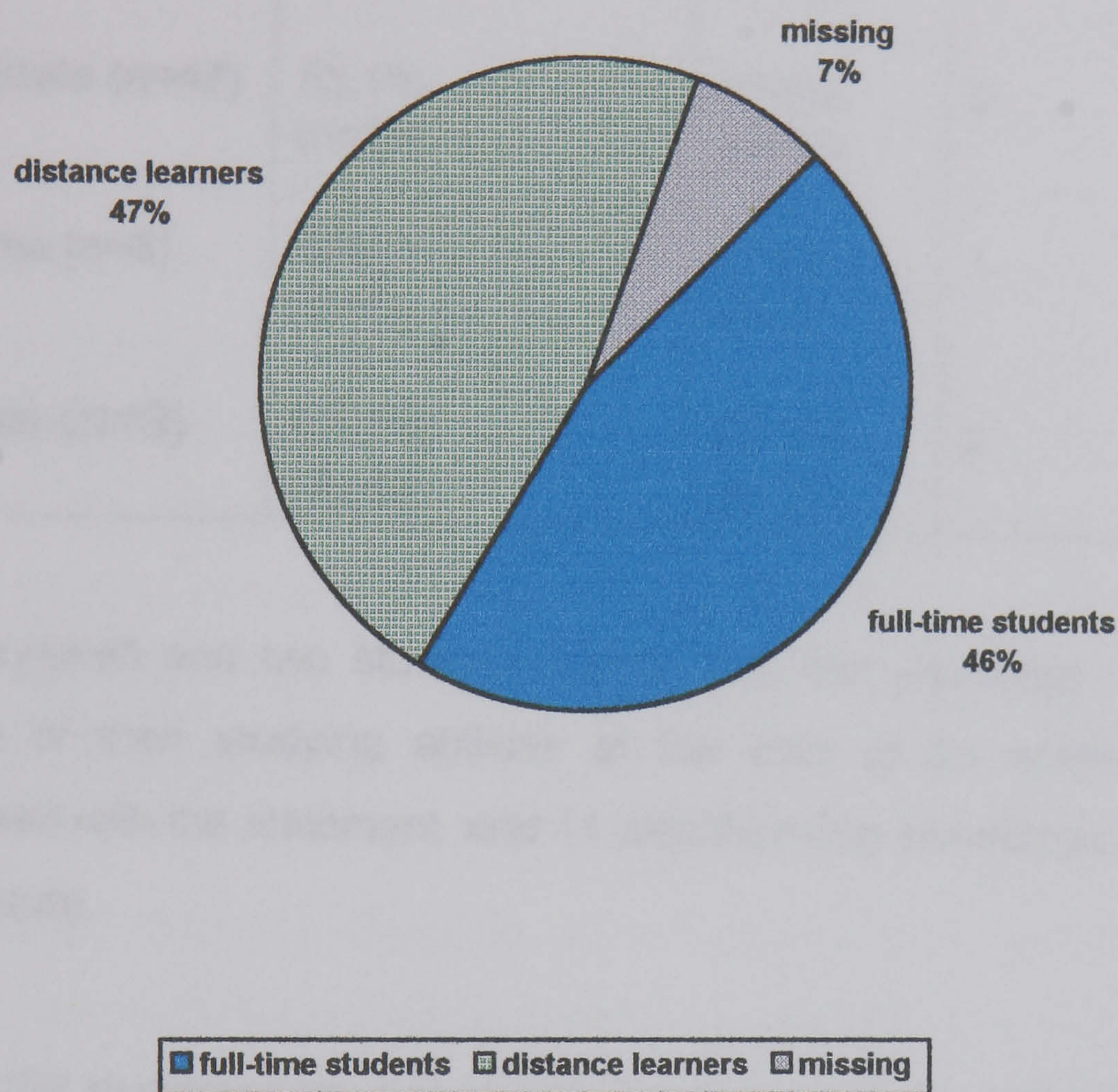
Ten of the 179 questionnaires sent out to the sample population were returned as ‘not known at this address’. Excluding the 10 unopened responses, the final response was 117 yielding a response rate of 69.2%. The Occupational Health Nurses had the highest response rate. The results are shown in figure 6.1. It indicates that of the whole sample, Occupational Health Nurses made up 71% with 83 responses out of the total of 117; District Nurses made up 17% and Health Visitors made up 12%.

Figure 6.1 Distribution of respondents according to specialism

SPECIALITY	ACTUAL RESPONSES	POSSIBLE RESPONSES	RESPONSE RATE
District Nursing	20	29	68.9%
Health Visiting	14	22	63.3%
Occupational Health Nursing	83	117	70.3%
TOTALS	117	169	69.2%

Of the 117 respondents, 54 identified themselves as being full-time and 55 identified that they were distance learners. This information is displayed in figure 6.2. as a Pie Chart to show the distribution of full-time and distance learners. This shows that the full-time students made up 46% of the total group with the distance-learners making up 47% of the group. Eight students did not answer this question and are shown as ‘missing values’ in the pie-chart.

Figure 6.2 Proportion of the students who attended full-time and by distance-learning



Fifty-three students had no post-registration qualifications on commencing their course. Forty-seven students held a certificate-level qualification. Eight students held a diploma and nine students were graduates. In figure 6.3, these results are compared according to their mode of attendance. The results indicate that the majority of students commenced their diploma-level course with either no post-registration or a certificate-level qualification. There is little difference between the two groups in this respect. It is noted that 8 respondents did not provide this information.

Figure 6.3 :Academic level at the start of the diploma course related to mode of attendance

<i>Academic qualification</i>	<i>full-time students</i>	<i>distance learners</i>	<i>Unknown mode of attendance</i>
RGN (n=53)	37.7% (n=20)	52.8% (n=28)	5
Certificate (n=47)	53.1% (n=25)	46.8% (n=22)	0
Diploma (n=8)	50% (n=4)	37.5% (n=3)	1
Degree (n=9)	55.5% (n=5)	22.2% (n=2)	2

One hundred and two students agreed with the statement “Some people feel unsure of their studying abilities at the start of an academic course”. Four disagreed with the statement and 11 identified that sometimes some people would feel unsure.

Of the 102 students who agreed with the statement, 44 were full-time students and 51 were distance learners. Seven students did not provide information on their mode of attendance. Those 4 students who disagreed with the statement comprised of 3 full-time students and one distance learner. The 11 students who said that sometimes they would feel unsure were made up of 7 full-time students and 3 distance learners. One student did not provide information on their mode of attendance.

The students were asked to describe briefly, how they felt about their studying abilities at the start of their course. The qualitative responses show eight distinct categories which emerged from the data. Seven of the categories focus on various issues relating to student ability and one concentrates on the academic level of the course. Following their description, the categories are displayed in a cluster summary table in figure 6.4. Figure 6.5 indicates the number of full-time and

distance learners who identified each category. Both these figures are presented later in the chapter.

Category One- Concern about the academic level of the course

This category identifies a range of concerns relating to the nature and amount of academic work that would have to be completed by the students on the course, no matter which specialism they were studying and the mode of study. Twenty-one students identify issues fitting this category with students making general comments such as, *'Unsure of academic standard expected'* (Respondent 13, HV) and *'knowing you have to raise the standard, but not to which level'* (Respondent 91, OH distance learner) and *'not particularly worried about studying, more worried about writing abilities. Never had to present papers before and not used to this level of expression'* (Respondent 94, OH, mode of study unknown) and *'the diploma seemed to be a very advanced qualification to be working towards'* (Respondent 53, OH, distance learner).

This uncertainty has links with other categories that emerged and is particularly associated with the category labelled 'apprehension' exemplified in the following remarks, initially by respondent 24, a district nursing student, *'I felt that the volume of work to be achieved in the year would be beyond my capabilities'* and *'I questioned my ability to complete the written assignments to a high enough standard'* (Respondent 46, OH distance learner) and *'Worried about the ability to cope with the level of intelligence required to complete the course'* (Respondent 90, OH Distance learner) and *'Wondered how I would cope with all the subjects that were presented'* (Respondent 32, DN). This showed the concern about the amount and range of work that would have to be completed during the course.

There was also a link with the category labelled 'Time and organisational factors for studying' with another district nursing student (Respondent 28) saying, *'With the amount of course-work given, I wondered if I would be able to do it all in the allocated time given'*.

Category Two- Apprehension

This category focuses on the lack of self-belief the students had in their own ability to complete the course. Thirty-one students made comments in this category. It ranged from the view that their personal knowledge was lacking due to the irrelevance of other courses that they had taken and the worry of being in a more adult learning environment with the associated uncertainty about what was expected of them; the geographical isolation that was felt by being a distance learner is also included in the range of this category. As can be seen from this abstract there are close links with the category concerned with the academic level of the course, as well as with the age and ability to study; time lapse since previous study ; and motivation categories. Many of the students referring to this category wrote a general statement as shown by this quote from respondent 1(HV), *'unsure of own academic ability'* or *'sceptical of own ability to complete the course'* (Respondent 4, HV) or *'poor knowledge level'* (Respondent 35, OH, mode of study unknown).

The lack of preparation that the students felt when referring to previous courses was exemplified by remarks such as, *'Despite having attended evening classes felt nervous and unsure of what was going to be expected of me when I started the HV Diploma course'* (Respondent 6, HV) and *'I felt my previous courses didn't prepare me for the amount I would have to do'*(Respondent 7, HV) and *'I felt my past course's work and studying patterns inappropriate for newer schemes (e.g. giving tutorials)'*(Respondent 22, DN).

One student who had identified their apprehension saw the function of allaying these feelings within the role of the academic staff by saying, *'with proper tuition that it would be possible to complete successfully'*(Respondent 8, HV), however another student had the idea that they would be in a more adult learning environment when writing, *'being responsible for own study plan and self-learning was also a daunting prospect'* (Respondent 89, OH, distance learner).

Another issue related specifically to distance learning was the potential for isolation was mentioned in the following quote, *'I also felt particularly vulnerable because I live in Northern Ireland and geographically I was quite isolated from the other students'* (Respondent 70, OH).

The effects of how a student perceives him or herself in relation to fellow-students was included in this category as well as having potential links with the age and ability to study category. This link was demonstrated by the quotes from the following two students, *'Uncertain as to whether you can keep up with the others in a course'* (Respondent 31, DN) and *'Uncertain if grey matter would still work!'* (Respondent 62, OH, Distance Learner).

The link with the category on motivation was exemplified by the student who wrote that they, *'felt terrible! However, I was interested enough in my subject to have a bash'* (Respondent 60, OH, Distance Learner).

Once the students had settled in on the course, their initial apprehension began to lessen as they began to know what was expected of them. This is demonstrated in the following two quotes: *'but around 4 months after the start of the course I felt more confident in tackling course-work, essays etc.'* (Respondent 59, OH) and *'Initially, I started off quite badly in essay writing, however, towards the middle of the course, my work did begin to improve'* (Respondent 6, HV).

Category Three- Time lapse since previous study

Thirty-two students made comments in this category. The range of time since previous study was between 4 and 30 years! However, it was not only the actual length of time since previous study had been undertaken but how the educational process may have changed in that time (linking with the concern about the academic level of the course). The effects on the individual student of other students who had studied more recently linked with the apprehension category. Their own personal experience was not mentioned at all as being of any relevance. The effect of the time-lapse on the actual ability to study has very close links with

the age and ability to study category. The enthusiasm for the subject which was included in this category has also particularly close links with the motivation category. Many students made general reference to the fact that they had been away from studying by making general comments such as *'having been away from studying for quite some considerable time'* (Respondent 16, DN).

The potential changes in the educational system and the sort of course that they perceived they were embarking on were demonstrated by the following two quotes: *'it had been some 16 years since I had to study. The actual learning and writing has changed a lot since then'* (Respondent 114, OH, Distance Learner) and *'That after 13 years of non-study would I be able, in a short space of time, reach the required standard needed to upgrade'* (Respondent 38, OH, Distance Learner).

The effect of other students who had studied more recently was clearly shown by the student who said that they were *'overwhelmed by others who had completed previous diploma and professional studies courses'* (Respondent 18, DN).

Although the following respondent identified that there had been a sizeable gap since any previous studying was undertaken, the chosen mode of distance learning and the link with the motivation category overcame that barrier when he/she said, *'last formal learning experience was 25 years ago. My enthusiasm for subject overcame that barrier. Distance learning offered a method that suited my home/work pattern'* (Respondent 45, OH, Distance Learner).

Category Four- Time and organisational factors for studying

This category addresses the issues relating to the many pressures the students identified concerning family and domestic demands, work pressures and studying. Comments included that students did not want the course to become the dominant feature of their life. The adaptation to working life, studying and domestic responsibilities simultaneously is included in the range of this category. Another feature is the time constraint imposed for studying by the competing demands on the student's time. This certainly has strong links with both the motivation and

apprehension categories as well as linking with the time-lapse since previous study category. General comments that highlight these concerns are: *'Not sure that I could fit study into a busy domestic life - too tired physically and emotionally by the time children are in bed etc.'* (Respondent 1, HV) or *'I wasn't sure if I could cope with a full-time job and all the studying'* (Respondent 58, OH, Distance Learner) and *'Didn't want course to take over life!'* (Respondent 99, OH, Distance Learner).

The process of applying oneself to studying was mentioned by many of the 27 students who wrote comments fitting into this category. This is exemplified by the following comments: *'I felt I had to strongly discipline myself to studying'* (Respondent 19, DN) and *'Some concern that I could complete in time allocated'* (Respondent 40, OH, Distance Learner). The demands of work and the effects on the time available for studying were mentioned by this distance learner when he/she writes *'I also had a worry about my library facilities not that there were no facilities but that my long working hours would hamper my ability to get to them'* (Respondent 108, OH, Distance Learner).

Category Five- Age and ability to study

This category focuses on the perceived effect of the student's age and the ability to study effectively. Only eight students made direct reference to it. This category ranged from the feelings that age diminished the learning process through to the effects of studying alongside younger students which was mentioned in the time-lapse since previous study category. There are also links with the apprehension and concern about the academic level of the course categories. The general concern about age and ability was succinctly summarised by the following student who reported that he/she had, *'probably more grey hair than grey matter!!'* (Respondent 65, OH, Distance Learner). Other students were slightly more serious in their concern that they were at a disadvantage due to their age, both personally and from other students when they said: *'very apprehensive that I would be able to cope because of being a mature student'* (Respondent 49, OH, Distance Learner) and *'I also felt at a disadvantage to the younger people on the course who trained post-1982'* (Respondent 95, OH, Distance Learner).

The effects on the ability to cope with the course-work and writing that was expected on the course was summarised by the following full-time OH student who wrote: *'Being one of the older members of the group, raised doubts of ability to cope with paperwork'* (Respondent 73).

Category Six- Motivation

Very few students (N=4) specifically mentioned motivation as being of significance to them when they started their course. Of those that did write about it specifically, the range was from the slightly negative motivation of the prospect of being a distance learner through to the positively-motivated student. There are links with other categories discussed in this section, namely, the apprehension category and the organisational factors required for studying category. The slightly negative factor within the motivation category was expressed as, *'my ability to motivate myself and work alone'* (Respondent 33, OH, Distance Learner).

The students who wrote about their motivation in a more positive way addressed the topic from two different perspectives as follows: *'it is in my interest to succeed due to financial outlay, this is a great incentive in the studying process'* (Respondent 52, OH, Distance Learner) and *'I found that the course material was good and I was, therefore, motivated to complete each assignment'* (Respondent 86, OH, Distance Learner).

Category Seven- Recent academic studies

The remaining two categories contain comments made by students that showed they were well-prepared for the course they were embarking on. Those students who had recently completed a diploma-level course or enjoyed academic work were included in this seventh category. Eight students made specific comments in this category and examples are given: *'I was very unsure of my studying capabilities when I commenced the Diploma of Nursing the previous year. That year of study gave me great confidence in attempting more academic study'* (Respondent 3, HV) and *'Just completed Midwifery diploma, so I felt confident*

about my studying abilities' (Respondent 5, HV) and *'Not worried-enjoy academic work'* (Respondent 43, OH).

Category Eight- Confidence

This category was developed separately from the one just mentioned, as the 16 students who reported items that were contained within it had not said that they had recently undertaken diploma-level work. It was composed of those students who were fairly sure of their abilities due to other experiences, but who did identify slight concern about the expectations of the course. Although there are obvious links with the recent academic work, there are also links with the apprehension and academic level categories. The general comments made by many of the respondents in this category are exemplified by the following quote, *'quite confident, but not too sure what to expect'* (Respondent 10, HV).

Those students who wrote about the effects of other experiences on their confidence are shown in the following two comments: *'In my career, learning has been an on-going process'* (Respondent 110, OH, Distance Learner) and *'I know how to study having undertaken 'how to study' type courses'* (Respondent 113, OH).

The final example from the responses given in this open answer fitted none of the categories. The student concerned said that they were quite confident, but was possibly let down by the course as he/she says: *'I thought that this college-based course would have a higher academic standard than other nursing courses I have taken'* (Respondent 17, DN).

Following these descriptions of the eight categories, they are now displayed below in figure 6.4 the Summary Category Table below.

Figure 6.4 Cluster summary table showing how students felt about their studying abilities at the start of the course

ACTIVITY	TYPE OF ACTIVITY	ILLUSTRATION
Academic level	the concern about the academic level of the course	'unsure of academic standard expected' 'the diploma seemed to be a very advanced qualification to be working towards'
Apprehension	the worry in their own abilities to complete the course	'unsure of own academic ability' 'uncertain if grey matter would still work'
Time lapse	the length of time since previous study	'It had been some 16 years since I had to study. The actual learning and writing has changed a lot since then'
Organisational factors	The juggling of home, work and studying	'I wasn't sure that I could cope with a full-time job and all the studying'
Age	The effect of age on the ability to study	'Probably more grey hair than grey matter!'
Motivation	The factors affecting the motivation of the students	'My ability to motivate myself and work alone'
Recent academic study	The students who had recently been studying	'Just completed Midwifery Diploma, so I felt confident about my studying abilities'
Confidence	Those students who felt fairly confident about their abilities	'Quite confident, but not too sure what to expect'

The number of responses made by both student groups are shown in figure 6.5 below. This shows that both groups had similar levels of apprehension about the course, although one of the comments made applies specifically to distance learning. This was in relation to the potential geographical isolation from the department. It appears that the distance-learning students identified more concerns about age, academic level, organisational factors and the time lapse since previous study. This was exemplified by the distance learner who had a concern about combining work, life and studying. Another distance learner wondered how

they would be able to find time to go to the library. It is noted that one of the full-time students also referred to this notion of combining life and studying. Another issue that seems to relate specifically to distance learning is in one of the respondents's ability to motivate themselves and work alone. Of the students who identified the category that addressed the optimistic feelings about studying, more full-time students identified that they were quite confident about their impending course.

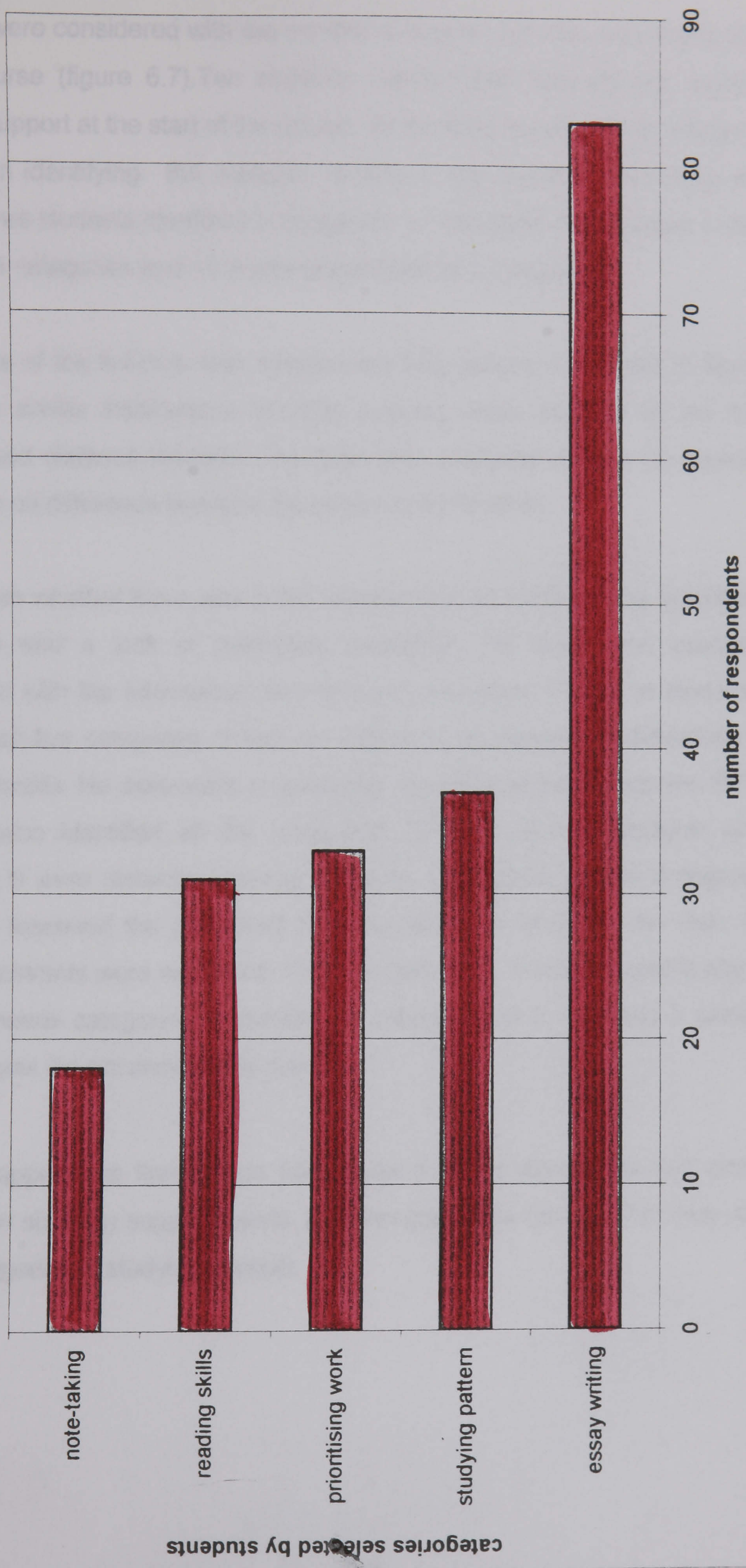
Figure 6.5 Number of responses to the eight categories identified by students

<i>CATEGORIES</i>	<i>FULL-TIME</i>	<i>DISTANCE-LEARNERS</i>	<i>TOTAL NUMBER OF RESPONSES</i>
Time lapse since previous study	6	26	32
Apprehension about course	15	16	31
Organisational factors required to allow studying	10	17	27
Concern about academic level	6	15	21
Confidence	11	5	16
Age and ability to study	3	5	8
Optimism due to recent academic study	4	4	8
Sustained motivation	1	3	4

As the categories are not mutually exclusive, it was not possible to apply the chi-square test.

The students indicated the studying support required at the start of their course . The information gained is shown in figure 6.6. The most frequently mentioned category (n=83) is that of guidance on the writing of essays. The least cited category (n=18) was guidance on note-taking. Developing a regular study pattern, prioritising work and guidance on reading skills were identified by 37,33 and 31 students respectively.

Figure 6.6 Identified student support at the beginning of the course



The data were considered with the number of support sources required at the start of the course (figure 6.7). Ten students claimed that they did not require any studying support at the start of the course; 38 students identified one category, with 31 of them identifying the category relating to the guidance of writing essays. Twenty-three students identified 2 categories; 17 identified 3 categories; 2 students identified 4 categories and 14 students identified all 5 categories.

The results of the full-time and distance-learning groups are shown in figure 6.8. There are similar distributions of study support needs required by the full-time students and distance-learners. The data were analysed using a chi-square test. There was no difference between the groups ($p>0.05$, $df=5$).

To establish whether there was a link between the 14 students who identified all 5 categories and a lack of post-basic education, the data were examined in conjunction with the information on post-basic education. Of the 14 students who identified all five categories, 6 held no additional educational qualifications and 8 held certificates. No diplomates or graduates identified all five categories. Of the 14 students who identified all the categories, 5 were full-time students and the remaining 9 were distance learning students. In addition, to see if degree-level education lessened the perceived studying needs of students, the data on the graduate entrants were examined. Of the 9 graduates, 3 did not identify any of the studying needs categories, 2 identified 1 category and 2 identified 3 categories. Two students did not answer this question.

Whilst it appears at first glance from figure 6.9 that diplomates and graduates have fewer studying support needs, 2 of the graduates claimed that they required three categories of studying support.

Figure 6.7 The number of studying support categories identified by the students

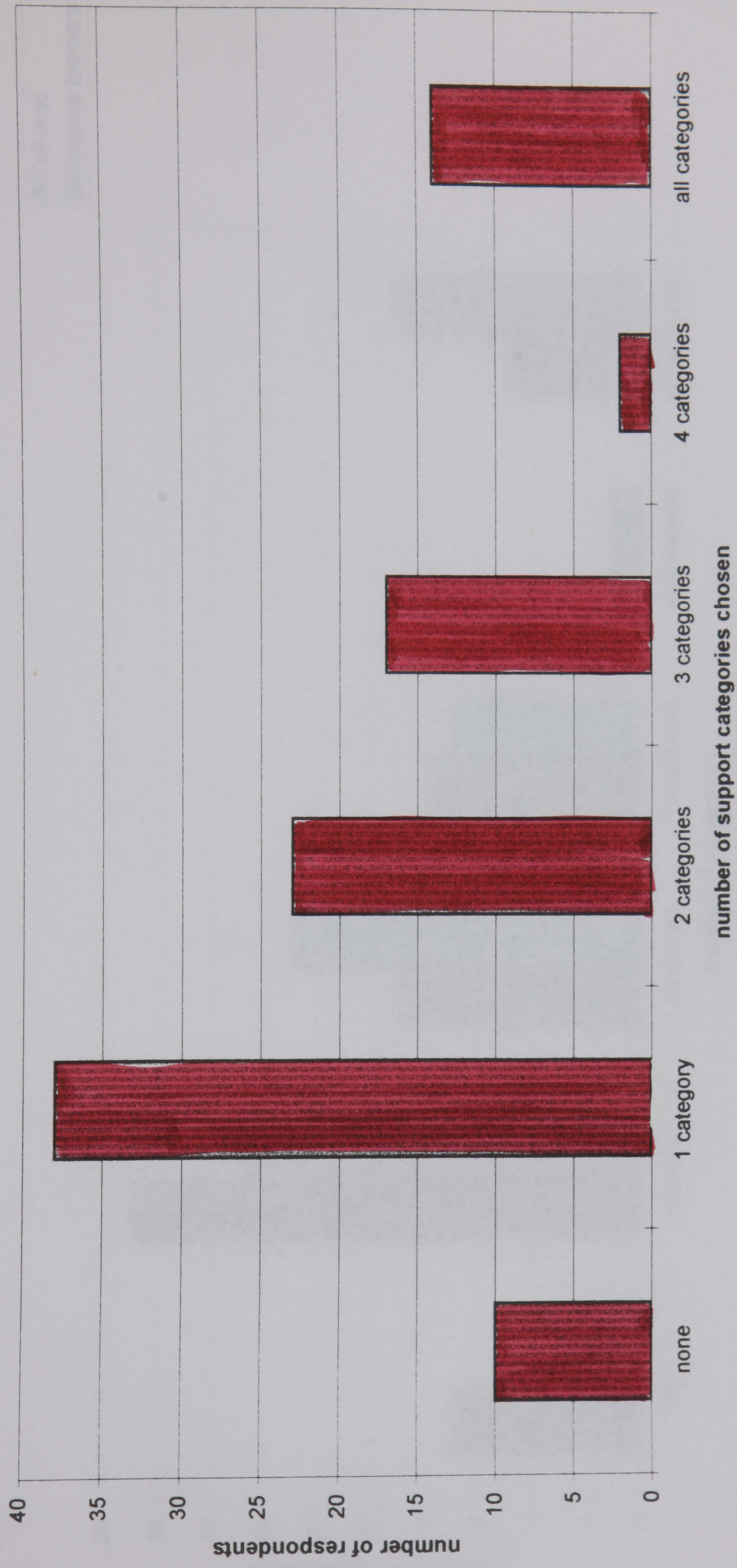


Figure 6.8 The comparison of full-time students and distance learners in respect of studying support categories

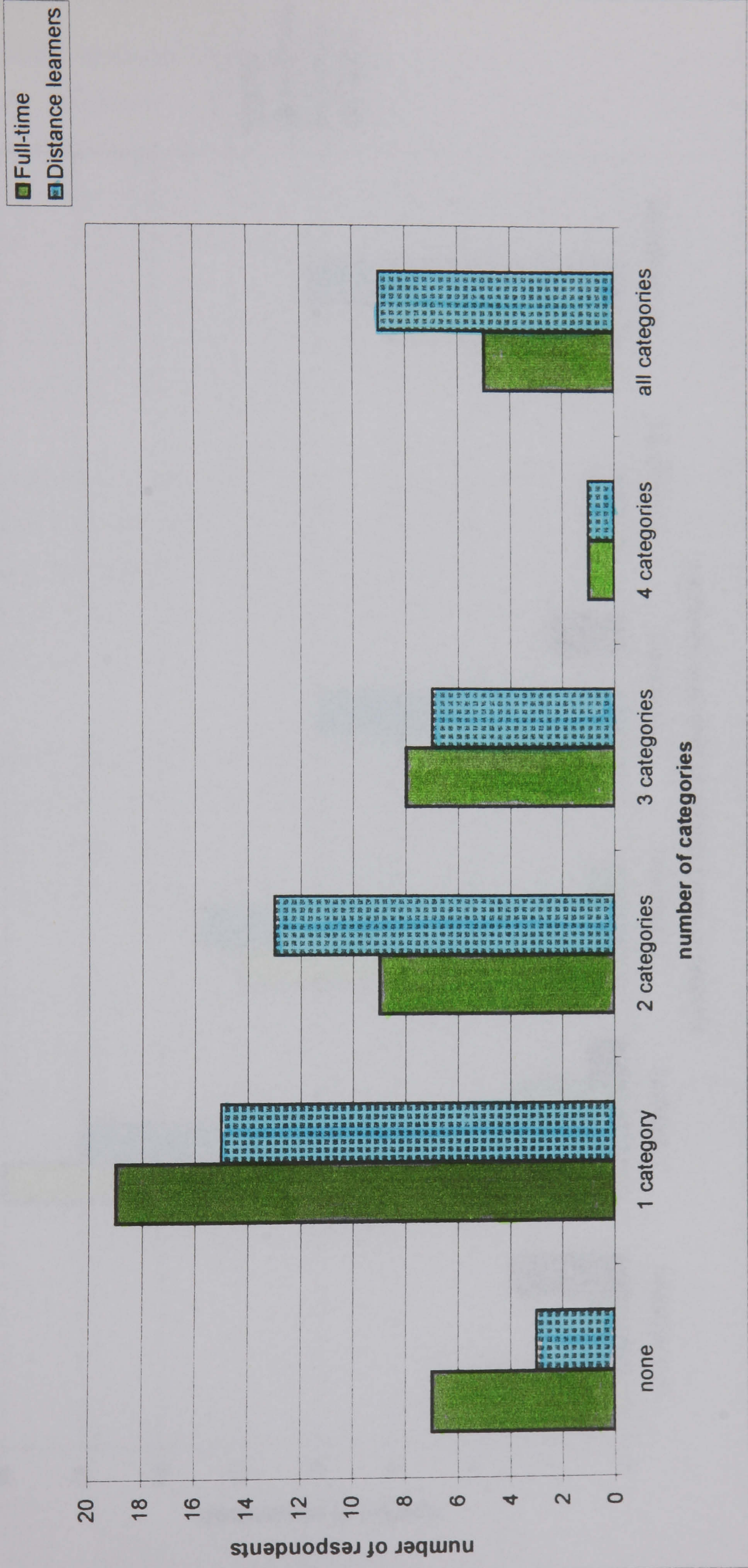
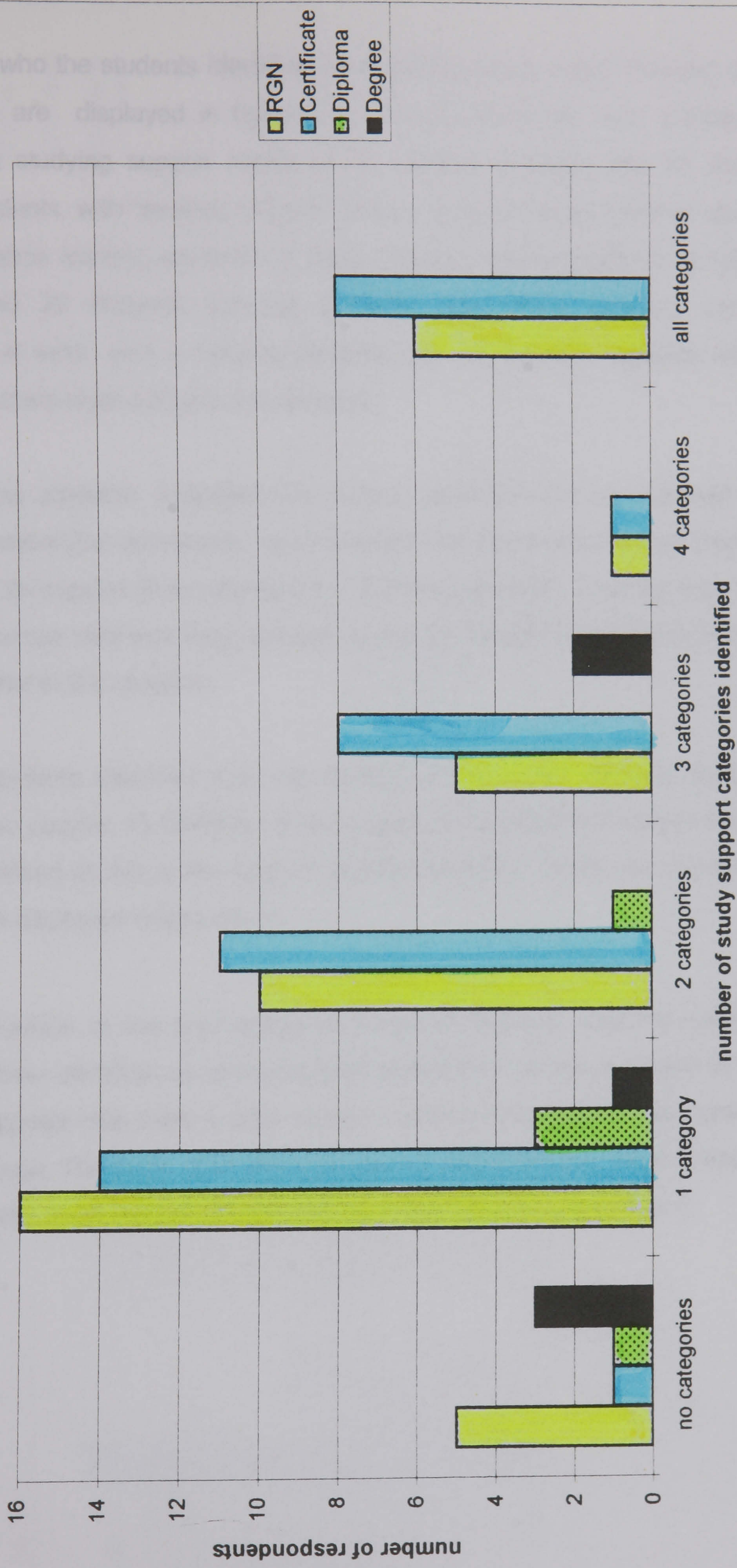


Figure 6.9 Entry-level and number of study support needs



The people who the students identified as providing study support to them during their course are displayed in figure 6.10. The 'course tutor' was identified as meeting the studying support needs of 23 full-time students and 30 distance learning students, with 'another student' offering support for 25 full-time students and 29 distance learning students. A family member gave support to 19 full-time students and 22 distance learning students. The 'other' category included colleagues at work, and a hospital librarian with 20 full-time students and 11 distance learners responding to this category.

More full-time students contacted the subject specialist (14 as opposed to 9 distance learners), but conversely, more distance learners contacted their employer or manager for support (9 as opposed to 2 full-time students). Four full-time and 2 distance learners said that they needed no-one to support them. There was one non-responder to this question.

Forty-one students identified only one person who met their studying needs, 49 identified two people; 15 identified three people; 6 identified four people and one student identified all five of the support sources specified. There was one missing case. This is displayed in figure 6.11.

A cross-tabulation of the prior academic levels of students, with the number of individuals they identified as giving support during their course is shown in figure 6.12 . It suggests that there is little variation between the full-time and distance-learning groups. The application of the chi-square test would be invalid in this case because of the large number of cells with expected frequency less than 5.

Figure 6.10 People identified as meeting the studying support needs of students

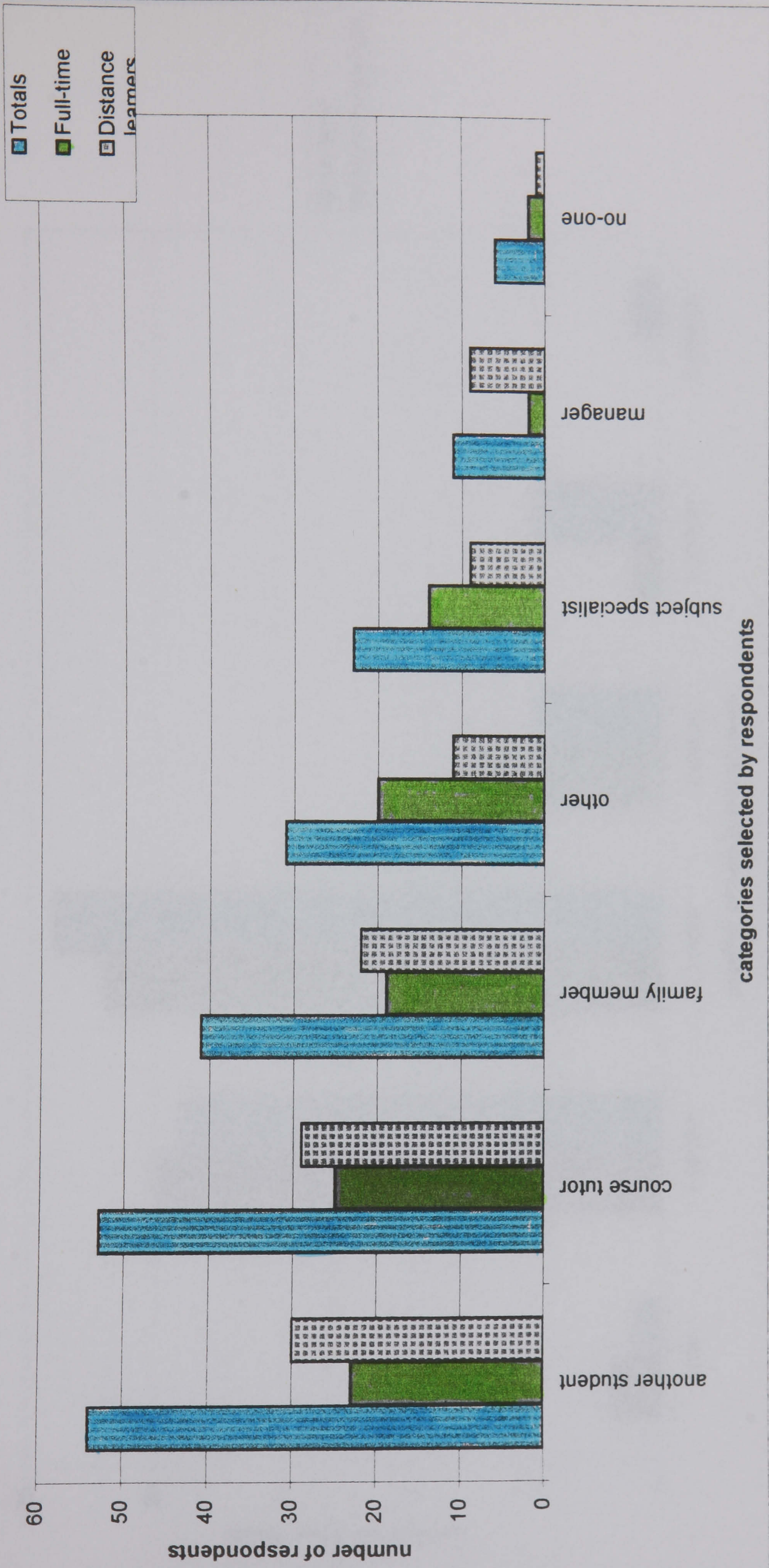


Figure 6.11 The number of people who met the students' studying needs

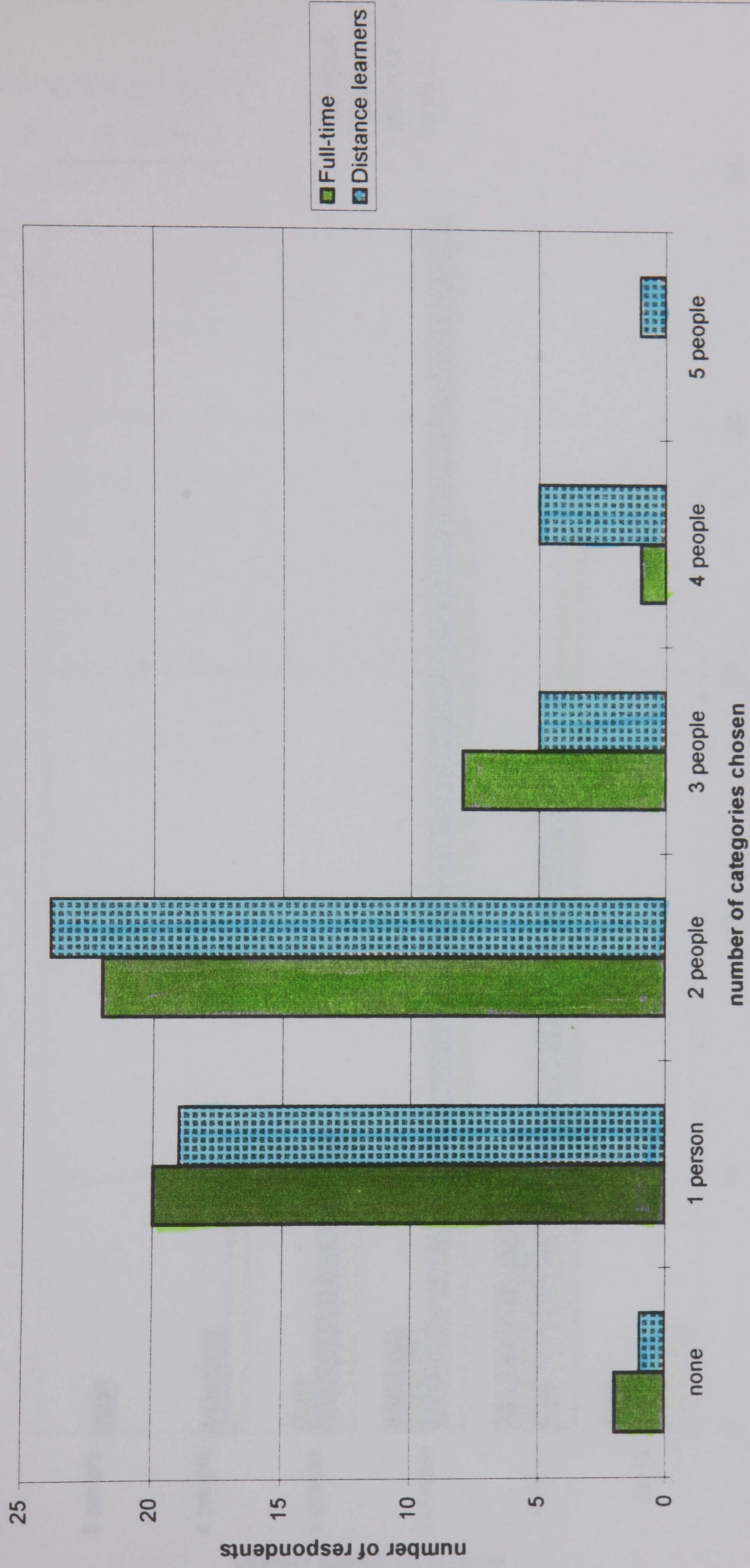
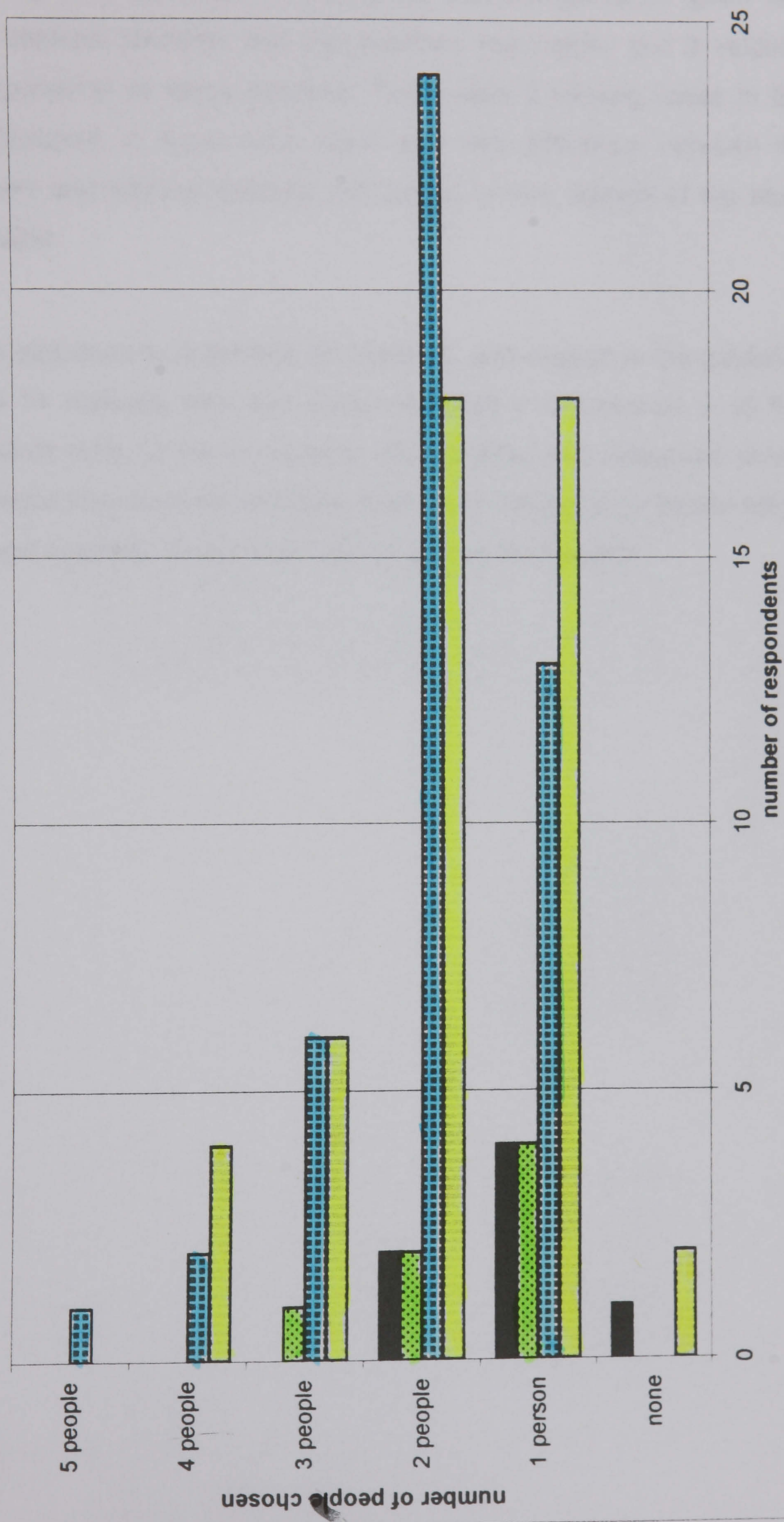


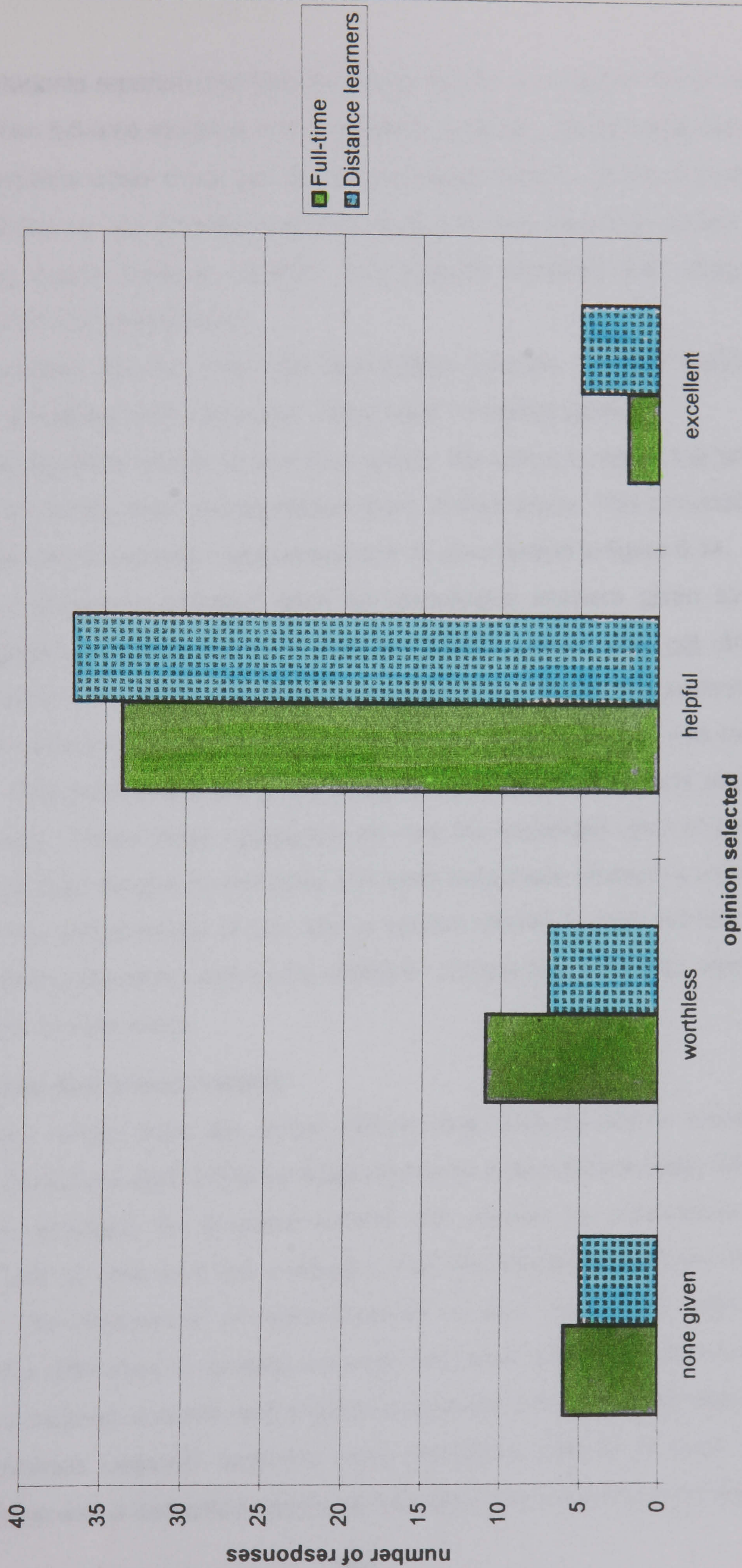
Figure 6.12 Number of people meeting studying support needs of students displayed by academic entry level



From the total student group, twelve students replied that there had been no formal guidance relating to study skills; 18 identified that the guidance given was worthless; 77 students identified that the guidance was helpful and 8 students identified the guidance as being excellent. There were 2 missing cases in this answer. As displayed in figure 6.13, there was little difference between the distance learners and full-time students with regard to their opinion of the study guidance available.

The data were examined to determine the opinions, with respect to the guidance offered, of the 14 students, who had earlier identified a requirement in all five categories of study skills. Of the 14 students who identified all 5 categories, only 2 found the guidance they received worthless. Nine found the guidance helpful with a further 2 finding it excellent. One student did not answer the question.

Figure 6.13 Opinion of the formal guidance given on studying skills on the course



Eighty-nine students reported that tutorials were offered on a regular basis during the course. Ten full-time students and 4 distance learners reported that tutorials were only available when requested by the individual student. Of the 5 students who reported that no tutorials were available at all, one was a full-time student and the remaining 4 were distance learners. Two students identified both categories and there were 7 non-respondents.

Fifty-eight students claimed they had face-to-face tutorials; 12 had telephone tutorials with 40 ticking both responses. There were 7 missing values.

The students described briefly in their own words, the extent to which the tutorial system offered during their course helped them in their study. This provided the following data, which has been categorised and is summarised in figure 6.14.

Three major categories emerged from the descriptive answers given by the students. Seventy students identified that the tutorial system was not directly helpful to them in their study while only 29 responded that the tutorial system was helpful. The remaining 18 students identified that the tutorial system was helpful sometimes. This pattern seemed to be similar in both the full-time and distance learning groups. These three categories will now be expanded upon in greater detail to show their ranges. In summary, the open responses showed a variety of opinions of the effectiveness of the tutorial system offered to both full-time and distance-learning students, with many students commenting that they were not directly helpful to their study.

Category One- Not directly helpful

This category ranged from the actual difficulty the students had in locating a member of the tutorial staff, either by telephone or on a face-to-face basis. When a tutorial was arranged, its potential benefit was marred by interruptions, the perceived lack of time and the confusion that the student sometimes felt on departure. The importance of fellow-students is also highlighted within this category. The difficulties in locating a course tutor was mentioned exclusively by the distance-learning students, with a general comment being made by respondent 60,(OH, Distance Learner) *'lecturers were sometimes difficult to track down'*. Although there was a dedicated telephone line within the department for distance-

down'. Although there was a dedicated telephone line within the department for distance-learning students' use, this was deemed to be too expensive to use by 7 distance learners, as shown by the following example, *'I cannot afford the luxury, hence I have to do without it'* (Respondent 66, OH, Distance Learner).

When the distance learners attended the department for their core module weeks, the 'tracking down' process continued, with one student saying that, *'Appointments were not kept'* (Respondent 73, OH, FT). For the many students who did manage to have tutorials, the issues of their usefulness were related to the timing, privacy and perceived relevance by the student. A district nursing student (respondent 19) illustrated this problem with timing by writing, *'timing made me feel I was limited with the time I had to ask questions'*. Four students lamented the fact that they did not have individual tutorials and the effects this had on the time factor. One student said, *'felt very aware of the time limitations and other students' needs during group tutorials'* (Respondent 37, OH, Distance Learner). Similarly, those students commenting on the lack of time felt that this marred the quality of the tutorial, with 13 students identifying the fact that tutorials were, *'often rushed and not enough guidance given'*. (Respondent 37, OH, Distance Learner). This student went on to comment that *'Tutors gave impression that students did not require help in a structured format'*.

The privacy a student had during the tutorial has already been mentioned with reference to the situation when individual tutorials became group tutorials. However, five students mentioned the fact that constant interruptions by telephone were *'off-putting'* (Respondent 106, OH, FT).

The relevance of the tutorial seemed to depend on who took the tutorial according to 2 students, with one student commenting, *'I came out more confused than when I went in'* (Respondent 19, DN) and another saying that, *'they were often not relevant to the work which followed'* (Respondent 20, DN).

For one student, the tutorial did not meet his/her expectations noting that, *'they were continually redirected at self-discovery'* (Respondent 107, OH, FT).

Many students in this situation turned to their peers for support, writing, *'I derived more guidance from other students'* (Respondent 24, DN) and *'I managed to get*

more by telephoning fellow students. Face-to-face basis preferred' (Respondent 92, OH, Distance Learner).

Another student thought that it was potentially problematic to have a tutorial with the person who was marking course-work. He/she wrote that, *'Perhaps if they had been with someone other than the course-leader who was involved in the marking of work, it would have been easier to discuss problems'* (Respondent 11, HV).

The reason for having the tutorial system in place was not clear to some students who made comments such as, *'tutorials were given when assignments were given back after marking! Of no great benefit to studying'* (Respondent 80, OH, FT) or *'if you were doing well, there was not much input from tutorials'* (Respondent 29, DN) or the comments made by one of the diplomates that, *'the tutorial system did not exist. Used as a means of returning essays'* (Respondent 30, DN).

Associated with the purpose of the tutorial system was the student who saw them as fostering dependency when he/she wrote that the tutorial system had not been helpful because, *'I believe I could have been left to my own and plodded on merrily by myself. The difference between being hand-fed i.e. RGN training (old) and distance learning are a vast distance apart.'*(Respondent 63, OH, Distance Learner).

Unlike the other respondents in this category, the reason that the tutorial system was not deemed to be helpful was based on the feelings of independence within this student. As has been shown though, within this section, for many students, both full-time and distance-learning, the tutorial system was not particularly helpful and did not enhance the learning experience. However, twenty-nine students did derive benefit from the tutorial system and this category will be discussed next.

Category Two- Tutorials were helpful

The range of this category was inclusive of those students who found it helpful to discuss problems and issues with a course tutor who was approachable. Some students indicated that although they preferred having face-to-face tutorials, it was an additional support knowing that the telephone tutorial was in place if needed and therefore, this has also been placed in this category. It seemed that another

students indicated that although they preferred having face-to-face tutorials, it was an additional support knowing that the telephone tutorial was in place if needed and therefore, this has also been placed in this category. It seemed that another main benefit of the tutorial system for these students was the guidance offered by staff with the preparation of their dissertations. The ability of the tutor to keep the student on the right lines seems to have been valued by these respondents. A general response by many of the 29 students within this group in relation to the tutorial system was that they were, *'supportive and encouraging'* (respondent 9, HV) and *'useful because they built my confidence in my own ability'* (Respondent 22, DN) and *'it was helpful to have someone to discuss things with'* (Respondent 53, OH, Distance Learner) although this student did say that he/she preferred the face-to-face tutorial system rather than the telephone tutorial system. However, for other students, the telephone tutorial system enabled problems to be dealt with quickly, as exemplified by the next comment, *'I tended to use the telephone tutorial system when I had a problem or needed some information. The system worked well as problems could be addressed quickly.'* (Respondent 61, OH, Distance Learner).

The approachability of the tutor encouraged the student to contact them and this is shown by the student who said, *'I knew if I was having difficulties the course tutor was easily available most of the time'* (Respondent 59, OH, FT). For another student, there was comfort in discussing problems with a tutor, rather than another student, as shown in the next extract, *'I felt more comfortable discussing my shortcomings with a tutor rather than a fellow student because of their professionalism and experience'* (Respondent 18, DN).

The main benefit of the tutorials in guiding and directing course-work was mentioned by many of the students, both full-time and distance-learning students and is summarised by the following comments, *'I found the tutorials helpful in planning and pacing the work for the dissertation'* (Respondent 76, OH, FT) and *'The tutor could direct you in the right direction on what he/she wanted so you didn't waste time'* (Respondent 7, HV).

issues, some of which were similar to category one called 'not directly helpful', discussed above. The justification for having this third category is that the student actually wrote that sometimes the tutorials were helpful, whereas those students in category one found the tutorials of no direct benefit. Eighteen students were included in this category. One student found the tutorials *'fairly useful as a morale booster'* (Respondent 4, HV) while another wrote, *'mixed feelings. Confirmed that projects and assignments were on the right lines.....however, not the most important tool in my study approach'* (Respondent 34, OH, Distance Learner). Those students who raised issues similar to category one reported that, *'time did not allow enough depth'* (Respondent 42, OH, FT) or *'Sometimes individual tutorials became group tutorials and there was lack of time'* (Respondent 43, OH, FT) and finally, *'tutorials were always rushed and without a clear structure'* (Respondent 81, OH, Distance Learner).

Figure 6.14 The 3 categories identified in response to whether tutorials helped the students with their studies.

<i>ACTIVITY</i>	<i>TYPE OF ACTIVITY</i>	<i>ILLUSTRATION</i>
Not directly helpful	Students did not gain any benefit from the tutorial system	'Lecturers were difficult to track down'. 'Often rushed and not enough guidance given' 'I derived more guidance from other students'
Helpful	Students found tutorials of benefit	'Supportive , encouraging' 'I knew if I was having difficulties the course tutor was easily available most of the time'
Sometimes helpful	Students found the tutorials of some use some of the time.	'Fairly useful as a morale booster' 'Time did not allow enough depth'

The responses to the Likert scale -I am satisfied with the learning experience that I had on the course are displayed in figure 6.15 for 54 full-time and 55 distance-learning students (there were 8 missing values). One had rated themselves in the 'strongly agree' response. The results indicate a similar response in the 'agree' response between the two sub-groups. More distance learners(n=7) strongly agreed with the statement than did full-time students (n=2). More full-time students disagreed and/or were neutral in their responses than in the distance learning group. Only 3 of the 14 students, who had identified all five study support needs at the outset of their course rated their satisfaction level as 'disagree'.

Figure 6.15 Responses to the statement 'I am satisfied with the learning experience I had on the course '

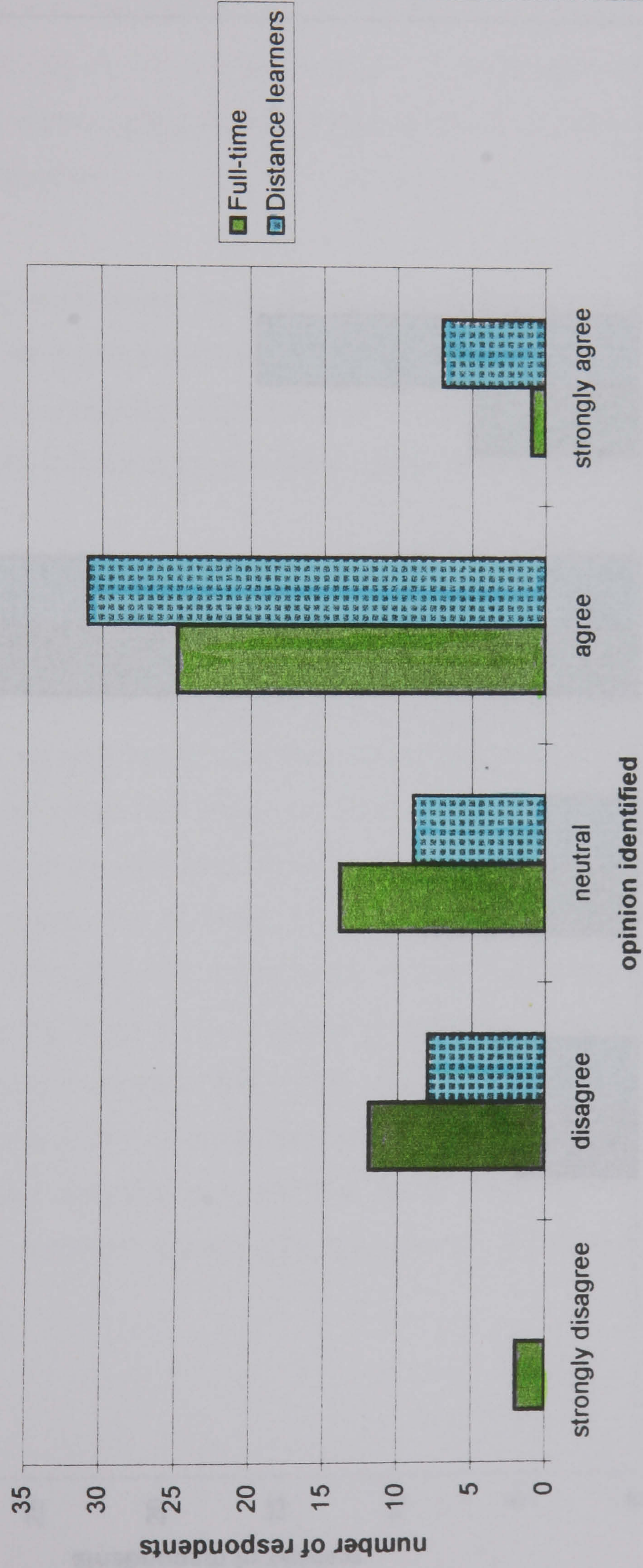


Figure 6.16 Responses to the statement 'I think I gained a lot of knowledge on my course

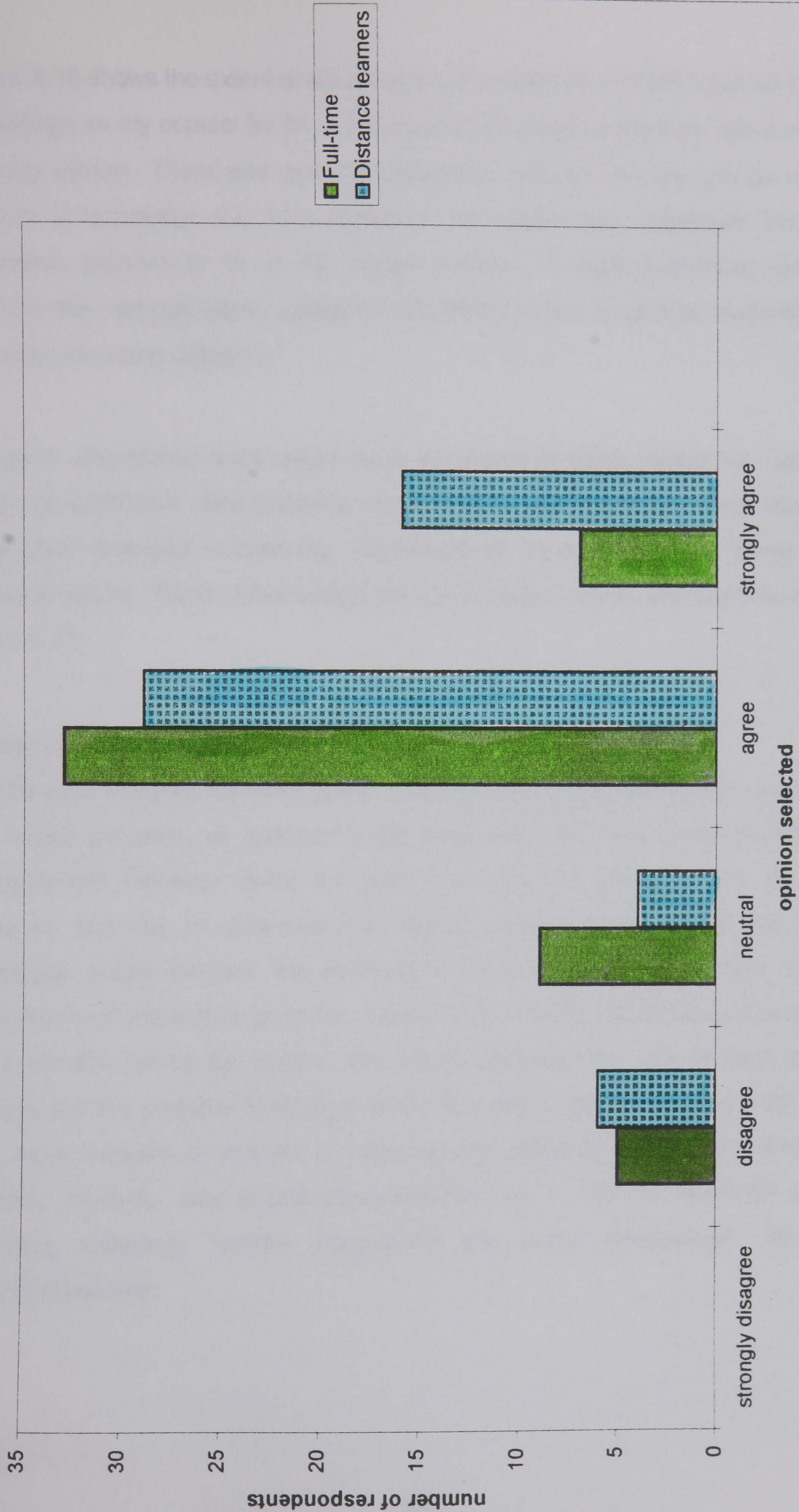


Figure 6.16 shows the extent of agreement to the statement 'I think I gained a lot of knowledge on my course' for 54 full-time and 55 distance-learners (there were 8 missing values). There was general agreement between the two groups on the amount of knowledge that they gained on the course they undertook. The only difference appears to be in the higher number of distance-learning students (n=16) in the 'strongly agree' category, in contrast to the 7 full-time students who identified the same category.

Students volunteered what would have enhanced learning during the course. From the qualitative data gathered from this third open question, three separate categories emerged concerning organisational issues, teaching issues and personal issues. These three categories are illustrated below and summarised in figure 6.17.

Category One- Organisational factors

Twenty-nine students identified topics relating to the organisation and running of the course generally, as opposed to the more direct teaching issues identified in category two. However, there are close links with that category. The range of category one was on class size and tutorial facilities both at college and in the workplace; library facilities; the workload of the course and the attitude of, and consistency of information given by, college staff. Overall, this category may reflect the frustration felt by the student who wanted to make the most of their time in college and the possible feelings of bafflement when other things got in the way. The large numbers of students in some classes, particularly among the distance-learning students, was specifically mentioned by 5. This is illustrated in the following statement, *'smaller classes-40+ too many!'* (Respondent 40, OH, Distance-learner).

There was a plea from at least two students for, *'more tutorials on a one-to-one basis'* (Respondent 99, OH, Distance Learner) and the need for a *'local mentor'* (Respondent 53, OH, Distance Learner).

As a point of interest, more than one student offered to act as mentors for students undertaking the distance learning course after them, with one student in particular writing, *'May I suggest giving new students phone numbers of those having already completed the course, just for support and a listening ear!'* (Respondent 62, OH, distance learner).

The lack of provision of library books was noted by 16 students who commented on the lack of specialist books in the library, making general comments such as, *'the library facilities were very poor'* (Respondent 16, DN) .

The organisation of the course itself attracted comment by many of the students, with comments suggesting that it appeared, *'amateur and chaotic at times'* (Respondent 52, OH, Distance Learner) and that *'major changes were made with no notice when the changes had been known to staff for some time'* (Respondent 56, OH, Distance Learner).

Other students made reference to the modular structure of the course, feeling that it affected the quality of the course. This is exemplified by the following quotes:

'If the course was not so disjointed, tutors would have known as to what level to pitch the lectures at' (Respondent 80, OH, FT) and *'a more stable course structure. Modular system entailed too much winding up to study and winding down to go back to the workplace.'* (Respondent 97, OH, FT).

The amount of coursework attracted a variety of views from the feeling that there was too much on the district nursing and health visiting courses to the opposite view that there was not enough on the occupational health course. 'Over-assessment was highlighted by the following student, saying, *'if the total of assignments etc. to be handed in were less, I would have been able to learn more'*

(Respondent 21, DN). One of the health visiting students (Respondent 13) said, *'I would have preferred to have a list of all essay titles and the submission dates at the start of the course so that I could have planned ahead and studied at my own pace'*.

The student who felt there was under-assessment wrote that their learning would have been enhanced by the requirement to *'do more coursework'* (Respondent 81, OH, Distance Learning).

Three students requested that a sample literature review and explanation of what was required in written work should be included in the 'Return to Study Pack' distributed to the distance learning students at the start of their course. A return to study programme was not available to the students undertaking the district nursing and health visiting courses.

As mentioned above, the need for consistent information and advice, as well as interest shown in the student was deemed to be very important and this is summarised by the following student, *'too many conflicting views from tutors - as I did not want to get confused, I did not know which one to listen to!'* (Respondent 71, OH, Distance Learner) and *'to feel that people running the course were more interested'* (Respondent 112, OH, Distance Learner).

Category Two- Teaching factors

This category, which has obvious links with the previous one, focused on the day-to-day issues that students felt diminished their learning. An issue that was mentioned at least 33 times was related to the quality of the lectures that were given to students, both by course tutors and external lecturers. There was also a request for more practical sessions which would help relate the theoretical knowledge gained in the class-room to the practice setting as well as more guidance and support from tutorial staff. The issue relating to the quality of the lectures offered to students was mentioned generally by many students with such

comments as *'better quality lecturers'* (Respondent 23, DN) and *'having tutors who were adequately prepared to give lectures'* (Respondent 12, HV) or *'having a course leader who was not out of their depth'* (Respondent 16, DN).

It was not only course tutors who were criticised for having low standards of teaching, but subject specialists and external lecturers too. *'Lectures by specialists were of a very low standard indeed'* (Respondent 35, OH) and *'subject specialists having an informed base as to what OH nurses are aiming to provide'* (Respondent 50, OH).

However, this issue is summarised and brought to attention by the following student who wrote, *'Lecturers at times were not prepared, did not appear and even gave a repeat lecture. With one week at lectures for each module, this, I feel was unacceptable. I felt I should have a refund for "goods undelivered". Good lecturers enhanced learning'* (Respondent 60, OH, Distance Learner).

There was concern also within the student group that teaching issues had been on-going with a previous course and nothing was done about them, which is another quality issue. This is exemplified by the following comment, *'many problems had previously been mentioned by past years' students - if basic known flaws had been tackled, the whole learning process may have been enhanced'* (Respondent 11, HV).

The teaching strategies were also commented upon by the students with comments that there should be, *'greater emphasis on past learning experiences'* (Respondent 22, DN); *'fewer lectures, more individualised tuition'* (Respondent 14, DN); *'more time during lectures for note-taking and discussion'* (Respondent 31, DN); *'more active participation in all modules by students'* (Respondent 52, OH, Distance Learner); *'more tutorials relevant to practice'* (Respondent 19, DN); *'clearer learning objectives linked to the confirmation that these objectives had been attained'* (Respondent 39, OH, FT).

Another factor within this category related to the support and guidance that would have enhanced learning as described above. One student pleaded for *'a little more understanding from some members of the Department re. the amount of time some older students had spent away from study and their need for support and encouragement, not derision'* (Respondent 25, DN).

Other students made more general comments relating to general support as well as the more specific guidance required for the compilation of assignments such as, *'more support and guidance from tutors'* ; *'more structured tutorials on completing dissertation, especially the analytical content'* (Respondent 4, HV) ; *'more guidance during first term on essay structure and referencing'* (Respondent 1, HV); and finally, *'more guidance as to how to go about setting the assignments up, after all, that is all the tutors would like the student to do'* (Respondent 66, OH, FT).

Category Three- Personal factors

This final category addressed issues that related to what the student could have done to enhance their own learning, or accepting how difficult it is to try and attempt a course of study when committed already to domestic and working life. This makes it distinct from the previous two categories. Its range included such factors as the recognition of the development of metacognitive skills and the attitude towards distance learning itself. With regard to the realities of studying as part of an already busy life, one student said that they would like, *'more time. Distance learning is difficult when you have to cope with pressures of full-time employment and family commitments'* (Respondent 110, OH, Distance Learner) and another said they needed, *'more self-discipline'* (Respondent 46, OH, Distance Learner) .

The realisation that support ~~was~~ needed from employers, but not always forthcoming was highlighted by the following comment, *'in many instances, companies appear to oppose the idea of the nurse learning'* (Respondent 62, OH). No-one wrote of the need for support from the family in this context.

The metacognitive skills that had been identified within the students were expressed in the following two comments: *'I was able to be more selective of lectures which I felt were important'* (Respondent 15, DN) showing how the skills of discrimination were being used; and *'I feel that the course has given me the confidence for further study and could be beneficial in the future'* (Respondent 18, DN).

The final component of this category was the disincentive that distance education gave one student and the advantage of distance learning for another which supports the notion of personal support for every student. These concluding comments are: *'distance discourages me'* (Respondent 94, OH, Distance Learner) and *'the beauty of distance learning is that you have a reference library at hand to dip into'* (Respondent 78, OH, Distance Learner). These qualitative results are summarised in figure 6.17.

Figure 6.17 Summary table of open responses to the question ‘In your opinion, what would have enhanced your learning?’

ACTIVITY	TYPE OF ACTIVITY	ILLUSTRATION
Organisational factors	Improvements needed to the organisation of the course	‘smaller classes-40+ too many’ ‘local mentor’ ‘poor library facilities’ “a more stable course structure....’
Teaching factors	The quality of the teaching sessions	‘better quality lectures’ ‘greater emphasis on previous learning experiences’ ‘more tutorials relevant to practice’
Personal factors	How the student could have enhanced their own learning	‘more self-discipline’ ‘more time....distance learning is difficult when you have to cope with pressures of full-time employment and family commitments’

This concludes the presentation of results for the questionnaire. The discussion of these results is offered in the next chapter.

CHAPTER SEVEN: ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF THE COMPARATIVE SURVEY'S FINDINGS

Introduction

Following the presentation of the findings of the comparative survey of the learning needs of adult learners, the aim of this chapter is to analyse the set objectives of the survey and discusses the findings.

Analysis of the objectives of this study

Six objectives were identified and the effectiveness of each one will be described briefly at this stage and then expanded upon within the discussion section.

Objective 1. Identify what educational supports were needed by students who undertook a full-time or distance-learning diploma in occupational health nursing, district nursing or health visiting.

This objective was achieved from the responses to the questionnaire as most students identified support needs by answering questions 2a. and 2b. Student support needs that emerged from the data were concerned with individually-perceived learning and studying abilities. The recognition of worries and ability to juggle domestic, work and studying commitments was also a major factor.

In addition by the categorising of the data gathered in question 3f., three major areas emerged relating to educational support, relating to the organisation, teaching and personal factors that the students felt could have enhanced their learning.

Objective 2. Analysis of who met students' identified learning needs. With the students responses to question 2c., this objective was achieved within the questionnaire. The influence of other students and the course tutor was very important to both full-time and distance learners and could be a potential difficulty for distance learners who may feel isolated. It was noted from the responses that tutors were able to meet many of the students' needs, but, the student also had to have support from family members and employers. In the latter case, 11 students

identified managerial support. Obviously for the full-time students away from the workplace, this was less of a concern, but for those students learning in the workplace, it could be argued that lack of managerial support could add an additional pressure.

Objective 3. Identify what study skills guidance was required by the students undertaking a diploma-level course in occupational health nursing, district nursing or health visiting. This objective was concerned more with the demands of the course itself and the most frequently identified study skills support that was required by students was guidance on essay writing. This data was gathered by the responses given to question 2b. This is not surprising in a course made up of continuous assessment.

Objective 4. Identify what guidance on study skills was offered to the students undertaking a full-time or distance-learning diploma in occupational health nursing, district nursing or health visiting. In conjunction with objective 3, the existing tutorial system was not entirely successful or helpful to 41 of the students replying to this question. What emerged from the descriptions was the need for individual tutorials, privacy during a tutorial, a telephone tutorial system that was efficient and accessible and enough time allocated to the tutorial to enable support/advice to be given. In both courses, tutorials were available to all students although 5 students were unaware of this. Telephone tutorials were only available to the distance learners. This objective emphasised a criterion for good practice in the provision of student support.

Objective 5. Critically compare whether full-time students and distance-learning students have similar learning and study skills needs. This objective was achieved by the results of the questionnaire, seemingly showing little difference between the learning needs of full-time students or distance-learners. What was interesting were the similarities of categories identified by adult learners at the start of a diploma-level course and the continuing need for support and guidance from

academic staff. This has established another criterion for good practice in terms of student support.

Objective 6. Determine whether previous academic study is associated with the amount of educational support that may be needed during either a full-time or distance-learning course. Although this was a small-scale questionnaire, the results did not suggest that the students who lack recent higher educational experience need more initial support. What seems to be important is the need to assess each student on an individual basis. This applies to both distance learners and full-time students. Therefore, this objective was achieved within the questionnaire.

Analysis of the methodology

The mixed quantitative/qualitative approach was successful in this part of the study as a large amount of data were gathered for analysis, both in tabular and descriptive form. The open responses allowed the attitudinal feelings of the students to be included and this was exemplified in the questions relating to the structure of the tutorial system. Students were asked to identify whether tutorials were offered on regular basis and their mode of delivery (questions 3a, 3b and 3c). From the quantitative data alone, it was shown that there was a formalised tutorial system, both on a face-to-face and telephone basis, but the qualitative data showed that it was not enough to offer such a system- what was more important is what goes on in the tutorial and its usefulness to the individual student.

The advantage of using an anonymous questionnaire meant that students gave frank answers, which sometimes challenged the objectivity of the data handling. However, such wide-ranging answers could be used well to identify criteria for good practice in the development of an effective tutorial system for adult learning programmes and, as a consequence, the effectiveness of the learning experience. The slight drawback of the anonymity was the inability to follow-up students by interview at a later stage to pursue responses in greater depth. The non-respondents posed a dilemma for the researcher. If they did not respond because they had such negative feelings, then their valuable comments have been lost for

analysis. Furthermore, the recollection of a bad experience had the potential of harm to the individual which the researcher could not ameliorate.

As a response rate of 69% was achieved within one week, a follow-up of the non-respondents was decided against. In retrospect, it may well have increased the response rate to have done this, even though that would have meant writing to all respondents. Oppenheim (1972) noted that it is unusual to obtain a response rate of 80% even from a group who were interested in the subject-area being studied.

Another limitation within the questionnaire was asking people who have successfully completed a course to think back to the start of their studies. It could be questioned as to how objective they could be. Norman (1982) discussed the storage of memory, highlighting that the appropriate trigger may promote recall. This was the intention of the questionnaire. However, it is acknowledged that such recall may have been influenced by other events and issues, thus making it less than reliable. Koriath and Goldsmith (1994) researched memory, highlighting the controversy surrounding the issue and concluded that there are two types of memory. The first one related to the amount of memory stored and the second one related to the accuracy of that stored memory, which is applicable to this situation. It could be argued that meaningful events would be retained in the second type of memory identified by Koriath and Goldsmith (1994) as the correspondence type of memory. Slamecka (1985) asserts that the context in which an event occurs is as meaningful as the actual event itself. However, it is also recognised that there is no way of corroborating what an individual recalls. Slamecka (1985) then concludes that if many people recall similar things independently (as in this survey), then it could be argued that the group recall may be valid.

The reliability of the questionnaire could have been checked by asking another group of adult learners to complete it to see if similar findings were obtained.

The inclusion of both open and closed questions in the questionnaire itself enabled attitudes to be expressed fully by the respondents. Oppenheim (1972) suggested

that it would be difficult to re-word attitudinal questions reliably, which is why a set of questions was designed for each main issue under study. In addition, consideration was given to the off-putting nature of long questionnaires. The final way of checking the reliability of the findings obtained from the questionnaire was to corroborate the findings with the literature on adult learners (Oppenheim 1972).

Within the questionnaire itself, it would have been useful to ask students to identify their age and gender to explore this concept in relation to age and the ability to study in greater depth, as well as asking them why they had undertaken the course. This would have confirmed the supposition that the students enrolled on the course to gain a vocational qualification which was termed instrumental by Wagner (1990) and vocational intrinsic by Strang in 1987. However, the biographical data is available from the student records and although this information cannot be directly linked with the students who wrote about their age being a limitation to their studying abilities, it would enable the range of ages of students on all the courses to be shown.

One of the complications of non-response was highlighted when 8 respondents did not identify their mode of study. In the design stage, this was seen as an 'either/or'-type question, so it was rather surprising that the 8 students did not reply to it.

Discussion of results and main findings

The majority of the students in this study began their course with either no further educational qualifications or holding a post-registration certificate. This lack of further educational experience may indicate that more support is required for such students coming into a course, but other variables such as domestic and work issues must also be taken into account with all students, no matter what educational background they may have. Anxiety may be raised if a student had completed further study but had difficulty completing it for a variety of reasons. Perhaps a possible conclusion that can be drawn from this is that some educational courses may increase anxiety. The fact that there were fewer diplomates and graduates on the course has also to be recognised.

Bernt and Bugbee (1993) linked recent academic experience with potential success on an academic course by looking at assessment outcomes alone, because they suggested, such qualified students have the metacognitive skills needed to cope with the assessments. However, their study did not take the subjective aspects of course satisfaction into account. In this study, there has not been a confirmation of their findings, as many students entered the course with no additional education experience and they all managed to complete the course. Additionally, from the range of responses given in questions 3d and 3e, most students found the learning experience and knowledge gain positive. However, as the researcher was a course tutor, the respondents might have been responding as they thought they thought they should. Additionally, in retrospect things might appear slightly better.

The responses in the three open questions focusing on perceived ability as the start of the course, the usefulness of the tutorial system and the factors that could have enhanced learning are similar to the 'situational', 'institutional' and 'dispositional' factors identified in the Cross Chain of Response model of student drop-out as discussed by Gibson and Graf(1992). As mentioned above, despite the identification of many components parts of Cross's categories within this study, no-one dropped-out of the course. It would seem, that while previous academic qualifications may give the student confidence in their learning abilities, it should not be assumed.

An analogy to show this would be the situation where a nurse finds him/herself in the role as a patient. It could be assumed that they already have the knowledge needed to make decision about treatment, when, in fact, they are in a different situation and may still need guidance tailored to their needs in that situation.

The data gathered in this study shares more of the finding of Powell et al's study in 1990 who determined that educational status at the beginning of a course was of less importance than the subjective rating of education undertaken previously.

One hundred and two students agreed with the statement 'some people may'

feel unsure of their studying abilities at the start of an academic course', which was confirmed by the qualitative data which the students included when asked to describe their feelings at the start of the course they undertook.

Eight categories emerged from the data, of which two were positive about the abilities of the students, with the remaining 6 identifying doubts and concerns.

These categories were:

- Academic level of the course
- Apprehension
- Time-lapse since previous study
- Time and organisational factors for studying
- Age and ability to study
- Motivation
- Recent academic study
- Confidence

The issues raised by the students about their concerns relating to study fell into two main categories which can be interpreted as 'internal' and 'external' concerns. Powell et al's study (1990) had similar categories which were labelled as 'predisposing' characteristics, ie. preparation, motivational and demographic factors, and 'institutional' characteristics relating to quality and difficulty of course material, administrative factors and services provided by the institution. Valcke et al (1991) distinguished such concepts as problem-centred support or content-orientated support.

Internal concerns

This related to the complex issues such as personal ability to study and the length of time since an academic course had been undertaken. The students, both full-time and distance learners had to make a lot of arrangements in order to complete the course which would suggest that their motivation would be high to pursue such difficult arrangements. The organisational factor was mentioned by 17 of the distance learners and 10 full-time students showing the competing pressures faced

by adult students when trying to 'juggle' work, home and studying life. The difference between the full-time and distance learners was that the majority of the latter were also working while studying.

These students may not value their work experience and high motivation as preparing them for higher education, but identify their perceived lack of ability to study and complete the course as pointed out by Rees and Reilly (1990) and Biggs (1978). Similar findings to the feelings expressed by the students have been identified in other studies, namely Woolfe et al (1987) who found that adult learners felt significant uncertainty and showed feelings of insecurity about their feelings about learning competence. However, there was no reporting of the 'disorientating dilemma' as identified by Mezirow in 1978.

Another major concern that emerged in this study was the students' uncertainty about the 'standard' that they should be working towards and again this was found by both McGivney (1993) and the study carried out on mature students by Smithers and Griffin (1986).

Age and ability to study may be a factor with Rogers (1989) pointing out that many adult students believe that intellectual ability declines with age and that this belief can cause problems in the older student. In this situation, Rogers argued that the student's motivation can overcome any slight decrease in intellectual function that may be associated with ageing.

Similarly in the study carried out by Smithers and Griffin in 1986, three quarters of the sample questioned reported having problems with study methods, with 40% specifically identifying essay writing as being a real problem. In the study carried out, 83 students identified essay writing as an area that they felt they needed help in developing. Of the 14 students who chose all five support categories, there were no diplomates or graduates. Five of these students were full-time and the remaining nine were distance learners. What is not ascertained in this survey is whether they had more studying needs because of the mode of the course undertaken, or due to their previous educational experiences. However, 2 of the

graduates did choose 3 categories which again supports the notion for an individual assessment of support needs rather than the presupposition that previous education allays anxieties

The importance of other people support the student through a course would also be included in the internal concerns framework. In this study, only 3 people said they did not need any support. The only difference between the full-time and distance learning students in this study was in the choice of 'employer/manager' and 'subject specialist' categories which would be a matter of the ease of access to such people. This would relate to the mode of study undertaken. Only one student identified all 5 categories within the question relating to who met the studying support need. This has a bearing on the potential conflict that advice from so many people might have. It is recognised that there is the possibility that a student with such supportive needs could become reliant on the tutor for help. It would seem to be important for the personal tutor to avoid creating dependency within such a student. The results indicate that the distance learners did not seem to be deterred from seeking support from a variety of sources.

The structure of the personal support given to a student on a course becomes apparent when looking at the three categories identified by the students in relation to their satisfaction with the tutorial support available on the course. As mentioned earlier, the quality of tutorial is as important as the quantity that are offered and this is something that will be addressed in full in the re-development phase of the model of supportive learning. Three categories emerged from the qualitative data gathered and they were that tutorials were either 'not directly helpful', 'helpful' or 'sometimes helpful'.

The first category highlighted the need for the students to be seen on an individual basis, free from distractions, to ensure a working relationship could be developed between the student and the tutor.

This supports the notions written about by Eason and Corbett (1991), Knowles (1985), as well as Boot and Hodgson (1987) about the

teacher of adults being more in the facilitative role rather than the autocratic role as identified by Gardiner (1989). When the tutorial system was seen to be helpful, it was a useful way for the student to discuss issues in confidence, solve problems and develop their metacognitive skills. The 'sometimes helpful' category highlighted the potential frustration caused when the tutorial did not live up to the expectation of the student.

These categories that make up the Internal Concerns are applicable to nurse education and confirm the finding in the literature, in particular in Thyer and Bazeley's study (1993) examining the stressors place on student nurses at the start of the course, with regard to uncertainty and workload. McGivney (1993) also found that fear of the unknown can be quite of-putting for students. This would lend support to the criticisms levelled at the andragogical approach of Malcolm Knowles about the readiness of adults to be completely self-directing by Darbyshire (1993) and Burge (1988).

However, not all the categories that were identified by the students were of a negative nature. Twenty-eight students expressed hope and optimistic views about the course. This questions such as initiative as carried out by Marnell and Blanche (1990) in the potential for the installation of anxieties into new students discussed earlier in the chapter on adult learning.

External concerns

The concerns that have been grouped under this heading related more to the organisation and delivery of the course with the quality of such issues being at the forefront of the students' comments. The issues raised also reflect that current and former students speak to each other and quality issues need to be addressed. For the students paying their own fees, these quality issues were related to the concept of value for money. With regard to the use of lectures, which many students had complaints about, Jevons (1979:3) contemplated that *'lectures range from charismatic performances which fire students with enthusiasm down to the legendary transfer of the contents*

of the lecturer's notes to the students' notes without passing through the minds of either'.

The findings of this study do confirm the limitations of the lecture in adult learning as mentioned by Mager (1990) and Knox (1978) who both argued for the need for more interaction. The students in the study also wished for more 'hands-on' sessions which supports this view.

There is an issue relating to the quality of the course input by the academic staff in both full-time and distance learning courses and this has been written about by Eason and Corbett (1991) in terms of value for money. Perhaps there is also a connection with this criticism of the course and the actual knowledge level of the student. This puts the onus on the lecturing staff to help the student to apply and deepen their knowledge level on a particular subject. Bhola (1989) commented on the need for the lecture to be used with 'vitality' when working with adult learners to encourage participation. This strategy would help the application of theory to practice. It has to be acknowledged that some of the lecturing staff had no preparation to work exclusively with adults and this could have caused some dissatisfaction among the student group.

The lack of good library facilities which was highlighted by many respondents is an ongoing issue in both full-time and distance education and may be a further example of the uncertainty associated with their studying ability. With reference to nurse education, pedagogy, as described by Knowles (1985) becomes relevant with the example of the knowledge being passed from teacher to student. When a certain book was recommended, it was deemed to contain all the 'knowledge' that the student needed in that particular area. Within higher education, there is the encouragement for the student to find their own knowledge, but if the student is totally bewildered due to their experience in a highly pedagogical environment, then they will not know where to start looking as confirmed by Behrens (1993, Harrington and Spindle (1993) and Lange and Farr(1993). A return-to-study pack had been sent out to distance learners prior to enrolment on the diploma in

occupational health course. This could be developed to help allay many of the anxieties outlined above before the commencement of a course in a proactive way, rather than having to react to a difficulty after the course has started.

The feeling that some students felt over-burdened with assessment work reflects Boonadoo's assertion that Western countries over-assess students (1991). For a few respondents, the focus on assessments gave them little time for 'real learning'. It also highlights the need for students to understand the purpose of assessments.

The internal and external concerns developed from the findings of the survey enable a strategy for both formative and summative evaluation to be designed. This would address the issues related to the organisational and teaching factors that the respondents felt would have enhanced their learning and the effectiveness of the course. This will be presented at the end of the thesis.

Summary

This chapter has offered an analysis of the survey undertaken in the first stage of this research. In addition, the findings have been discussed. Kahl and Cropley (1986) reported a comparative study of 'traditional' and distance learning courses, outlining the differences between the two modes of study. This showed that the distance learners felt less certain of their abilities to complete a course as well as feeling more isolation from other students. The authors (Kahl and Cropley 1986) proposed that distance learning courses should have more input relating to the development of metacognition, which this author would agree with. However, the findings of Kahl and Cropley differed from the study undertaken by the author as no significant differences were found regarding the study skills identified at the start of the students' course. There is more agreement with the study of Köymen (1992) who found that there was little difference between a group of full-time and distance-learning students.

A major finding of this survey was that student support both through orientation to the course, making progress on the course and finishing it should be personal and

on-going in order to address the needs of a group of adult learners. There seems to be agreement in the literature that student support should be a proactive process, rather than a reactive one (Earwaker 1992). Any issues that were concerning the student could then be addressed during the early meetings of the student and personal tutor.

What was shown in this study was that adult learners, no matter whether they are undertaking a full-time or distance learning educational course have individual needs which should be addressed at the start of their course. Coats (1991) shared the notion that students have to be shown how to develop their own learning processes.

The results of the survey can also be used in the formative and summative evaluation of a distance learning course which will assist in measuring the effectiveness of educating community nurses by distance learning. With this in mind, and based on the above results, the author intends to refine the model of supportive learning described earlier which will enable students to develop their metacognitive skills as well as their self-confidence, giving them support as they begin, travel along and reach their learning destination. The revision is presented in a later chapter following the next stage of the research project. The second stage explored the experiences of distance learners, their community supervisors and the academics involved in a degree-level distance-learning course.

CHAPTER EIGHT: A QUALITATIVE EXPLORATION OF THE EXPERIENCES OF DISTANCE LEARNING

Introduction

The aim of the second stage of the research project was to explore the experiences of distance learning from the perspectives of the first cohort of students to complete the course (identified as the graduates in this study), the community supervisors who were involved with the students during the clinical component of the course and the academics involved in the theoretical phase of the course. It aimed to further develop the issues raised in the first stage of the research project.

This chapter presents method and findings of the interviews undertaken with the three groups identified above. Initially, the graduate interviews are reported, followed, in turn, by the community supervisors and academic colleagues. The reason that each interview is contained within a separate section of this chapter is to distinguish between the types of open and semi-structured interviews that were used.

Method

The specific objectives of the graduate, semi-structured, face-to-face interviews were:

- to evaluate the overall experience of being a distance learner.
- to identify particular areas of support needed by the distance learner.
- to determine an effective way of linking theory to practice and the role of the community supervisor.

The purposeful sample consisted of the first six graduates of the community health degree course who had studied by distance learning. The graduates were all willing to be interviewed for this project and each one was written to individually to ask for their involvement. This clarification of the purpose and nature of the research addresses the ethical issue of informed consent.

The graduate interviews were tape recorded, semi-structured and carried out on a once-only face-to-face basis. The aim of the interviewer was to 'establish a relaxed conversation' (Stenhouse 1988:51). In order to enhance the notion of the relaxed conversation, it was intended to tape-record the graduate interviews (providing the graduate had no objections). This allowed a free-flowing interview without the need for the interviewer to take copious notes which would prove distracting for both the interviewer and interviewee. Five of the six interviews were carried out on the planned face-to-face basis with the final one being carried out by telephone.

The confidentiality of the respondents was assured and they were informed that the tapes made would be destroyed at the end of the project. This once-only approach is justified by May (1991) when 'access to informants is difficult' as in this situation when the respondents were spread along the length of the United Kingdom. Additionally, it was envisaged that all the topics for discussion would be addressed on this one occasion. However, it was suggested to the respondents that follow-up may occur by telephone if further information was required. In the event, this did not happen.

As Miles and Huberman recommend (1994), no more than 12 topic areas were identified and the intention was to listen carefully to the responses of the interviewee. Contact summary forms were devised for the recording of the information gathered during each interview immediately after its conclusion. These forms were completed by the researcher without the presence of the interviewees. An example of this sheet is contained in Appendix III.

A checklist of topic areas was produced for the guidance of the interviewer which gradually moved from general topics to more specific ones as they were mentioned by each individual. This schedule can be seen in Appendix IV.

The intention of the interviewer was to remain neutral, employing probing as suggested by Polit and Hungler (1991). This would be particularly important as the

researcher was known to the graduates and had been a member of the course team responsible for the graduates' course.

In these interviews, the approach adopted was similar to the humanist principles of George Kelly's personal construct theory where there was an attempt to have an equal partnership between the person researching and the person being researched (Powney and Watts 1987:179).

The interview technique was tested prior to being applied to the graduate respondents. A student who was in the final stage of a different route of the distance-learning course was approached in order to pilot the tape-recorded interview. Approximately one hour was allocated for this purpose and the tape-recorder set. The tape-recorder was soon ignored and the conversation flowed freely, with the interviewer following up points that the student made. No difficulties were encountered with the discussion and the main issues were addressed within the free-flowing discussion. It was, however, useful to have the checklist to refer to before the end to ensure that the main points had been addressed.

The six interviews were carried out during December 1994, when the graduates had completed the distance-learning course. To increase the comfort of the respondents, it was intended to hold all the interviews at the graduates' homes. As it turned out, however, only three of the interviews were carried out at the graduates' homes; one was carried out in a hotel setting ;one was undertaken in the Department of Nursing and the final one was undertaken by speaker telephone to enable the tape recording to be made.

Each interview began with the following question, **Please would you tell me about your overall experience of being a distance learner?**

This led the graduates to recall the main experiences, their feelings throughout the course, raising the issues that were important to them. During the data collection phase, the interviewer addressed the notion of bracketing out or the Epoche process where her own knowledge of distance learning and adult

higher education were excluded from the discussion. The only interventions were to clarify or ask the graduate to expand on a topic.

Overall, the interviews went to plan, being very unstructured and free-flowing. The use of the tape-recorder enhanced this. The only exception to this was at one of the home interviews where there were constant interruptions by a series of telephone calls and visitors. The quality of the tape-recordings was excellent apart from the first one when the microphone was placed slightly too far away. However, the tape was audible, so analysis was possible with all six interviews. All the graduates gave very frank answers about their experiences on the course. This potential restriction of answers had been one of the concerns about the validity of these interviews, especially as the interviewer had been one of the course tutors. The validity of the data gathered could have been influenced by the expectation that the interviewer and graduate had of each other. The ability to follow the Epoche process as described by Moustakas (1994) ensured that the former tutor/student relationship was forgotten. This was the main reason that graduates were approached rather than current students on the course. As can be seen from the results, the graduates gave a full account of their experiences, giving both positive and negative responses. This supports the internal validity of the data, although Kincheloe and McLaren (1994) question the use of such a term in qualitative approaches. They argue for the term trustworthiness to be used as a substitute. Although this is a laudable statement, while there is doubt about the use of qualitative approaches, the use of familiar research terminology shows to the sceptic that attention has been placed on such issues. The inclusion of the graduates who are key respondents added to the validity as did the fact that each graduate was sent a copy of the audio-tape, a set of codes and the transcription of the taped interview. They were asked to check whether they had been fairly represented in the transcript. Five graduates responded saying that they were happy with their data.

Data reduction was used in all interviews to analyse the qualitative data gathered in the interviews. According to Miles and Huberman(1994:10), this is the process of *'selecting, focusing, simplifying, abstracting and transforming the data that appear in written-up field notes or transcriptions'*. Two ways of analysing qualitative data were considered to determine the most appropriate way of analysing the data that would emerge from the graduate interviews. One was the word-for-word transcription of the tape-recordings which would involve intensive secretarial costs and storage factors, but has been the most common way of transcribing qualitative data. Morse (1991) asserts that tape-recorded interviews need to be transcribed in order to obtain the full details of the interview. However, another approach is to transcribe the 'telling points' and have an 'index system' to locate specific parts of the tape at the analysis stage (Powney and Watts 1987:147). Stenhouse (1988) noted that a good procedure is to play the tape and make notes on a chart having three columns to record the:

- tape counter number
- the running index of contents
- verbatim quotations

To compare the effectiveness of both of these methods, one of the tapes was given to an audio-typist to transcribe. This process took some eleven hours as the typist found both the conversational style and dialect of the graduate difficult to follow. The tape was then returned, and without examining the written transcription, the data from the same tape were transcribed following the method suggested by Stenhouse. This process took approximately three hours. Both sets of notes were then coded on separate occasions, and finally compared. There was no difference in the coding pattern and both sets of data were complete. Therefore, it was decided that the audio-tape analysis was a suitable approach and that the remaining tapes would be coded in this way.

In addition, to add validity to the coding, a colleague undertook the coding of one of the interviews and then the codes were compared and discussed. There was similarity between the codes in the categories identified.

As suggested by Miles and Huberman (1994) a start list of codes for the data analysis process was developed and added to as new themes emerged from the data. This coding list is shown in Appendix V.

In the six audio-transcripts, every issue mentioned by the graduates was considered to be of equal value. The codes had been pre-grouped and these groups were confirmed by re-checking the data. This led to the codes being incorporated into groups of meaning; edited versions of these groups were then used for the next phase - the construction of the meta-matrix.

The next phase of the data analysis involved the reduction of the data by constructing a meta-matrix which allowed all the main themes of the data to be seen at once. Miles and Huberman (1994) refer to the meta-matrix as a monster-dog which is quite appropriate as it was composed of 15 sheets of A3 paper. The use of a two-dimensional meta-matrix shows 'what was there' (Miles and Huberman 1994:240) It displays multiple cases rather than separate individual cases as all respondents shared the characteristic of being a graduate of the distance learning course being studied. Following this display, partial ordering of the data can be undertaken by the process of clustering .

The data were entered into the meta-matrix in relation to the groups of meanings that had emerged from the coding process and the objectives that had been set for the interviews. The graduates, who were identified by a letter formed the rows. The group meanings were categorised to form the columns.

The categories included:

- the overall experience of being a distance learner
- distance learning work
- getting help
- keeping in touch with fellow graduates
- the strengths and weaknesses of distance learning
- the experience of the period of practice

The type of data entered into the meta-matrix included actual quotes or comments made by the graduates as well as paraphrased notes made during transcription and its use enabled a complete picture of the data to be compiled. This facilitated the process of cross-category clustering which allowed a broad picture to emerge of the experience of being a distance learner. Miles and Huberman (1994) suggest that a cluster occurs when it was mentioned by at least two graduates. In a display, the cluster is termed as an activity, with its meaning shown, then supported by illustrations from the meta-matrix.

Although there were only six detailed interviews, cross-case analysis was undertaken to attempt to develop an understanding of the issues raised by graduates.

Initially in the results section, brief biographies will be given of the graduates. However, any identifying details have been omitted or written in a non-identifiable way. Triangulation of the data was undertaken by analysing previous comments made by all the graduates in written evaluation forms completed in the spring of 1994.

Results

Graduate 'A'

This graduate lived in a semi-rural area and had been working in the speciality for at least 3 years. No formal education had been undertaken for approximately 15 years and this caused the student some concern at the beginning of the course. The first day was particularly stressful, as was the thought of the writing that would be required. Secondment to the course had been granted by the employing authority. The graduate was a single parent and this posed problems as there was a constant need to change roles. This would have been an advantage of being a full-time student, although this was balanced against the usefulness of being able to work while studying. The evaluation form showed that, this graduate had enjoyed the taught practice, having found the community supervisor informative and supportive. However, it

was noted in the interview that it was a slight difficulty undertaking taught practice having a lot of knowledge and experience in the speciality. However, a final comment added that completing the course in the shortest time available had left little time for extra reading. The issue of the availability of library resources for distance learners was also raised. During the interview, this issue was raised again with the graduate commenting that it meant a focus on the assignment, rather than the whole module.

Graduate 'A' identified that between 51-74% of the distance learning material had been undertaken, but that much catching-up reading had been undertaken. The graduate adopted a routine timetable to complete the distance learning material, the written work and making contact with the tutor. This enabled the tutorials to be very useful. Once any reluctance to approach the personal tutor was overcome, then the contact was valued when working on summative work. However, there was an anxiety about feeling foolish if help was asked for. There was some anxiety during holiday periods when the tutor could not be contacted and there was a tendency to feel isolated during the self-study phases.

On the subject of obtaining help from a mentor, Graduate 'A' felt that a mentor may lead the student off on a wrong track. Contact was also made with selected members of the group and this was felt to be important. At times it was difficult to contact the tutor by telephone in the early stages. The dissertation was useful as the choice of subject was made by each student. The modular course ensured that concentration focused on one area at a time, but that the links between the modules was useful. One module was terrible, however Graduate 'A' appreciated the fact that the course team responded to student evaluations. The course had been a positive experience overall, having effectively prepared this respondent for nursing practice in the particular speciality and a lot of theoretical knowledge had been gained. The benefit of this was the ability to be more assertive in meetings than before.

Graduate 'B'

This graduate lived alone in a very remote area and had been working in the speciality for at least 2 years. Education was an ongoing process, despite being in a remote area. The remoteness of the location enabled the student to have quite a lot of spare time for studying and also made the core weeks extremely valuable. Despite this, Graduate 'B' said that there was a sense of apprehension due to age and ability. During the interview, Graduate 'B' said that the contact with others was the best part of the course. Secondment to the course had been granted by the employing authority although this added a sense of obligation to the seconders.

This graduate had been able to develop self-confidence, according to the evaluation form. Additionally, the course had effectively prepared this graduate for practice. The community supervisor helped in the process of linking theory to practice during taught practice, but with so much experience, the value of supervised practice was less clear. Tutorial help was useful for the academic work and guidance. It was the importance of just knowing that someone was there to help - rather like a safety net. Feelings of confidence had spread to the students during the course from the tutor.

Graduate 'B' felt that a mentor would be useful in a helping 'buddy' type role, but that such a person would have to be knowledgeable about distance learning. One concern was mentioned about the access of library material to those students living in remote areas.

Approximately 75-99% of the distance learning material was undertaken. This graduate recommended longer time gaps between modules, where possible. This was due to the difficulty in accessing material, with little time left for reflection. Despite these difficulties, much skill has been gained in information retrieval. The stress of all the work in the second year and the writing of the dissertation caused a lot of pressure, although Graduate 'B' eventually found

the dissertation to be an interesting exercise. It was felt that the dissertation guidelines were not clear enough.

Overall, the course has made graduate 'B' much more politically aware and it was a positive experience on the whole. The potential for isolation in distance learning is there both geographically and in the sense of having less formal structure although this was balanced by the flexibility of the course. This meant that the student could stay in the workplace. In addition, the course developed self-learning skills.

Graduate 'C'

This graduate lived in a small town and had been working in the speciality for over five years. This graduate had been waiting to do the course for some time. During this intervening period, the course had become a degree level course and this was not what Graduate 'C' would have wished for. There was a perception that University would be very hard. Secondment had been granted by the employing authority and this was a burden, as during the course, Graduate 'C' felt like leaving, but worried about the implications. In addition, there was a lack of confidence about putting thoughts on paper.

The biggest difficulty for Graduate 'C' was shyness and the fear of meeting new people in an educational setting as well as a reluctance to contact the tutor for help in the early stages. This graduate would have much preferred to do the course as a full-time student to allow a period of settling in, gaining familiarity with the group and having more structure to the course. Distance learning made Graduate 'C' feel very isolated as well as making it difficult to build up confidence to phone other students. This did improve as the course continued. The fact that at every period of university attendance, more new people had to be met, added to the stress. This graduate was married with family and had ongoing work responsibilities of the caseload while studying for the course. This also added to the stress.

The evaluation form showed that it was difficult to really evaluate whether the course had prepared the graduate to work in the speciality as they had so much experience, however, the packs were helpful on the whole. Theoretical knowledge has been gained, rather than practical knowledge. Graduate 'C' felt that information-seeking skills had improved. The graduate reported that between 31-50% of the distance learning packs had been completed. The distance-learning packs were scanned for relevant information for the essay during the first year and much time was taken up with the summative phase of the module due to the time pressures. The community supervisor was deemed to be very knowledgeable and supportive although other colleagues were not. Graduate 'C' felt that distance learning was seen as being an easy option. By the second year, Graduate 'C' had got to know the tutor well although it was sometimes difficult to contact them. There was a lack of clarity about the structure of essays and an uncertainty about the relevance of feedback on completed work. This graduate recommended the introduction of a local support person who could be available to distance-learning students. Overall, this was a stressful experience for this individual who felt isolated and overburdened with the responsibilities of studying, work and juggling family life.

Graduate 'D'

This graduate lived in a large city and had been working in the speciality for 18 months. The graduate was self-funding throughout the course and had recently got married. Initially, there was slight uncertainty about what was being looked for in the written work, but on finding this out, there was a lot of self-growth and development.

This graduate felt that the course had been effective in the preparation for practice in the speciality. Graduate 'D' enjoyed the structure of the core week followed by the self-study phase and found it very different to basic nurse education which had been disliked. This approach enabled more discussion. Approximately 75-99% of distance learning material was completed by this graduate and there was satisfaction expressed with the assessed practice

component of the course. The benefit of distance learning was that you did not have to leave the workplace for extended periods, although much work was done in isolation.

However, the combination of working full-time and studying meant that there was little time for any social life. By the end of the first year, there was a feeling of total exhaustion and some frustration because of the pressures of fast-tracking and the lack of reading time. The dissertation was both useful at work and interesting to compile. Graduate 'D' contacted other students regularly during the course and kept in regular contact with the department which was easier being so close geographically. The relationship with the tutor was seen more like a colleague-type of relationship and was always encouraging. At first, there was a reluctance to phone, but towards the end, it was not a problem. Overall, it was a positive experience and Graduate 'D' would undertake another distance learning course again. Graduate 'D' was well-supported by family and friends. Due to commitment this individual had given to the course, there was a feeling of uncertainty about what to do at the end of the course.

Graduate 'E'

This graduate was married and lived in a large city and was new to the particular speciality, although held another community qualification. This graduate had previously undertaken distance learning with the Open University and expected the course to be harder work than it was. Graduate 'E' was looking for more challenges than the course presented and would have preferred to study full-time as listening triggers learning, rather than reading in Graduate 'E's opinion. In addition, there was a perception by this individual that no-one would be allowed to fail as it was such a new course and that perhaps an empire was being built. The graduate was self-funding throughout the course and wondered at times about the quality of the course. It was unfortunate that a grant could not be obtained for being enrolled as a part-time student. Despite being the first group of students to complete the course, too

many allowances were made for mistakes. The distance-learning course enabled home and work life to carry on, but that the social side of university was missing. Graduate 'E' said that the course had been effective in the preparation for practice in the speciality, but this view was tempered with some reservations. These related to the generic course content in part one and the lack of contact over the distance learning phase of the course. There was also some apprehension about the tutorial staff due to previous nurse education experience. One member of the course team intimidated this Graduate. It was also noted that the period of taught practice would be improved by improving the communication between the University and the practical placements, as well as attending to the assessment form. Approximately 51-74% of the distance learning material had been completed by this graduate.

The notion of fast-tracking meant that there was little time for wider reading. The distance-learning packs were scanned initially to find relevant material for the essay. As there was not the incentive to work for so many assignments in the second year, then not so many of the activities were done.

Graduate 'E' had found the tutorials to be of mixed benefit as there was uncertainty about their purpose. At times, they were quite demoralising as some self-doubt prevented Graduate 'E' from being more challenging. No contact was made with the tutor during the self-study phase as Graduate 'E' wanted to do it alone. However, the relationship with the tutor developed in the specialist year. The core weeks enabled contact to be made with other students which was enjoyable. More tutorial support came from the other more experience practitioners for this Graduate and they relied heavily on each other.

Graduate 'F'

This graduate had been working in the speciality for at least 5 years and had specifically chosen the course from a range of other possibilities. Graduate 'F' felt totally inadequate and insecure being a mature student. However, it was a

pleasant surprise to be treated ~~like~~ an adult. The graduate was seconded by the employing authority and wondered about the value for money of the course at times. This graduate was married with a family which meant that a lot of juggling had to be done to cope with work and family life pressures.

The course had given this graduate greater insight into the role of the nurse in the particular speciality. Approximately 51-74% of the distance learning material had been completed. There was a concentration on seeking out relevant material for the essays during the first year. The support of the tutorial staff was noted as being particularly helpful. It was relaxed and individually tailored. By the end of the course, Graduate 'F' admitted to feeling quite selfish going anywhere and everywhere for help.

There was some uncertainty about the value of having feedback for completed work. In addition, Graduate 'F' was uncertain about the value of a mentor, especially if they were unknown. A concern was raised about the lack of tutorial support during holiday times, especially when nearing the completion of the dissertation. Much support and networking occurred with the other students on the course who kept each other going. The benefit of the core weeks allowed them to meet regularly and enabled trust and friendship to build. However, the constant emphasis on the dissertation in part one of the course had been unhelpful and even threatening. In addition, there was the feeling that the goal-posts were constantly changing which was very frustrating. Graduate 'F' found that it was hard to keep going during the second year although there was much enjoyment gained from the clinical placement.

The cross-case analysis was then undertaken following the identification of the individual results. The first issue to be addressed in this section was the strengths and weaknesses of distance learning as perceived by the graduates. These results suggest that graduates identified both advantages and disadvantages of studying by distance learning. Two clusters appeared as strengths and another two clusters appeared as weaknesses. The strengths

included the integration of studying while working as well as the move towards the student-centred approach to learning.

However, this integration also formed part of the identified weakness cluster when graduates identified that the course was an additional feature of already busy lives. The other weakness related to the isolating nature of distance learning, particularly during the self-study phase of the course. These clusters are shown in detail in figure 8.1 'the strengths and weaknesses of distance learning-clustered summary table'.

Figure 8.1 The strengths and weaknesses of distance-learning - clustered summary table

ACTIVITY	TYPE OF ACTIVITY	ILLUSTRATION
STRENGTHS		
Integrating	the closeness of the course work to practice	'It allowed integration with work' (A) 'you don't have to leave your workplace' (B) 'it only required one week out of work at a time rather than one year. This enabled close links with practice' (D)
Enabling	the discovery of self-directed learning	'a very different way of learning'(A) 'It enables you to find the learning process yourself more easily' (B) ''You can set your own time and place of work' (B) '...setting of own standards of work' (E)
WEAKNESSES		
Juggling	trying to cope with studying, working and family life	'juggling home, work and study' (A) 'juggling roles -household things still needed to be done' (B) 'juggling life and work' (D)
Isolating	having to work alone	'potential for isolation during the self-study phase of the course'(A) 'lack of structure around you may lead to isolation'(B) 'you miss the social life of university' (E) 'isolation during the self-study phase -particularly when the dissertation was being written up' (F)

The areas of support needed by the graduates demonstrated the importance to the students of the periods of required university attendance which were known as 'core weeks'. This was despite the additional pressures it caused in their personal lives. Five major issues were identified by the graduates which proved to be a multi-dimensional series of clusters, with graduates identifying that keeping in touch with fellow-students and getting help from academic staff were undertaken for differing reasons and in different ways. These two areas were separated into two sub-areas within the category of getting help. Keeping in touch with other students is presented first, followed by getting help from academic staff.

The importance of the core weeks was highlighted in this cluster as were the benefits of learning from fellow students. The strength of the friendships made during the course was noted, and this is a surprising finding when it is realised that the students were only together for a total of 8 weeks, spread over a period of some 18 months. There was a gradual development of self-help among the students who contacted each other by telephone during the self-study phase. However, this became rather a burden for one or two of the students who were identified as being particularly helpful by other students. The result of this was that they were prevented from completing their own work, while trying to offer support to fellow-students. This display is presented below in figure 8.2 'keeping in touch with fellow students -clustered summary table'. This is followed by the 'getting help' cluster.

Figure 8.2 Keeping in touch with fellow students - clustered summary table

ACTIVITY	TYPE OF ACTIVITY	ILLUSTRATIONS
Networking	the contacts made with other students during the core weeks	'core weeks very important for networking with other students'(B) 'core weeks - very important. Could keep in touch with other students. It was nice to see everyone back again' (D) 'core weeks helpful for meeting other people'(E) 'core weeks important for networking with other students....networking limited to friends' (F) 'rang colleagues to sound others out...share and collaborate as much as possible' (B) 'learnt from other students'(D) 'had information about speciality from other students' (E) 'core gelled quickly - we'll always keep in touch' (B) 'now they're friends'(C) 'lasting friendships' (E) 'lasting friendships made in the core weeks' (F)
Learning	the value of sharing ideas and experiences with other students	'importance of keeping in touch with other students' (A) 'a lot of support came from other students, rather than from tutors. Relied heavily on each other' (E) 'students were far more supportive in terms of the insecurity. Development of trust and knowledge of other students' (F) 'newer students phone me' (D) 'people phoning me impinged on my time ...acting as a type of mentor' (E) 'students needed support for non-academic things' (F)
Befriending	the strengths of the friendships made during the core weeks	
Supporting	the self-support provided by the students	
Contacting	the particular student being phoned by another student	

There were five distinct ways in which help was sought from tutors. The other issue to emerge in this category was the potential for the development of the mentorship role, although it was not always seen as a necessity. The final category demonstrated the potential difficulty that 4 of the students identified in contacting tutors.

The role of the academic tutorial staff in providing assistance was clearly identified by the graduates as being concerned with advice about academic work. A lack of self-confidence and trust in the reaction of the tutor prevented some students from seeking help initially. As the students progressed through the course, this relationship appeared to develop with the tutor and for the most part, by the end of the course, there was no difficulty in contacting the tutor. The tutor's role was seen as an important 'safety net'.

The isolation noted as a weakness of distance learning was noted in this category as some of the students worried over vacation times when they thought the staff would not be contactable. The graduates also made comments about the role of a mentor within distance learning education, outlining the special qualities that such a person would need. A knowledge of distance learning was seen as being one of the prerequisites of a mentor. As can be seen from the following table, the value of feedback was not always seen as being of benefit.

These clusters are displayed in figure 8.3 'getting help from academic staff - clustered summary table' .

Figure 8.3 Getting help from academic staff- clustered summary table

ACTIVITY	TYPE OF ACTIVITY	ILLUSTRATIONS
Not asking	the reluctance of students to contact academic staff	'don't like asking for help...they'll think I'm a fool if I ring up and ask that' (A) 'reluctance to phone...she'll think I'm a real idiot. Being shy...if you say you need help, you'll bring attention to yourself' (C) 'reluctant to phone after the first core week...I didn't want to look like a real divvy and phone'(D) 'didn't contact tutor much...I tried to do it myself' (E)
Approaching	the ability of students to contact academic staff	'got easier to ask for help as I got to know the tutors' (A) 'I don't look on you as teachers...previous tutors were unapproachable' (D)
Assisting	the type of help required from academic staff	'easy-going, approachable tutors who treated you like an adult and human being. Recognised individuality' (F) 'tutor was a great help with the format of the essays' (A) 'links with academic staff for academic work and guidance. The dissertation would have been impossible without tutorial support' (B) 'tutor very positive for feedback and positive guidance' (D) 'you need to be fairly assertive with tutors...need for clear expression' (E) 'tutor approachable for academic work' (F)
Knowing	the personal relationship with the tutor	'just knowing I could contact someone was vital...a feeling of confidence spread from staff to students' (B) 'knew tutor so well by specialist year' (C) 'being there' (D) 'I knew I could ring you up...' (F)
Contacting	being able to speak to academic staff as needed	'worried about the isolation over Christmas holidays' (A) 'frustrating not being able to get through on the phone' (A) 'difficult to access tutor...more support needed from tutor at the end of the phone. Video tutorials would help'(C) 'got used to talking on the phone' (D) 'had difficulty contacting staff on phone. Uptight...wanted to be more challenging in first year'(E) 'felt abandoned over the summer... you really need that support when you're finishing off'(F)
Feeding back	the type and value of feedback and guidance given to the students	'clear guidelines for the dissertation would have been useful' (B) 'feedback from work not that helpful when you've passed...guidelines for work not always that clear' (C) 'unsure of benefit of tutorials in core week. Wanted to get feedback to know why particular marks were achieved...how can I get better' (E) 'uncertainty of usefulness of feedback being related to previous work' (F)
Mentoring	the potential role of a mentor in distance learning	'Informal guidance from a mentor...would have to be careful not to lead a student too much' (A) 'standing alongside, asking people what they're looking for and helping them to get there if they can...a buddy role. Knowledge of distance education would be helpful as well as being local. Would use it if you didn't know other students. Not a role the tutor can fill...just someone to talk to'(B) 'local mentor would be great...someone to turn to. As long as you've got someone to turn to, you're alright. Would have to have been a distance learner. How can people understand if they've not done it?' (C) 'would not contact a mentor if I did not know them' (F)

Six categories emerged within the approach made to the distance-learning material, showing how students worked through the self-study phase of the course. There appears to have been a clear focus on the assignment work. Within the overall experiences of the course objective, clusters emerged that related to the way the students approached the distance learning work.

Although this is directly linked to the ways in which help was sought from either other students or tutorial staff, interesting patterns emerged about what the students actually did with the distance learning material. Additionally, there are links within this section of the data analysis with the strengths and weaknesses section too, particularly in relation to the application of the material to practice and the lack of time a student had to complete the work. From the data gathered in the evaluation forms (reported in the student biography section), all the graduates reported that they undertook at least 50% of the material. A possible explanation for this incompleteness was the time factor. The main issue relating to time was the notion of 'fast-tracking', which was a term used to describe those students undertaking two modules per term. This would involve the students working on at least 160 hours of distance-learning material as well as the written module assignment per term. As will be shown in figure 8.4, this caused a lot of frustration and possibly explains why the work of the pack was focused on the assignment. Another cluster to emerge was the lack of recognition by people unconnected with the course of the amount of work that was involved in studying for a degree by distance learning.

However, the freedom within the assessment schedule of the course was shown by the perceived benefit of doing a self-selected topic for the dissertation. These main clusters are shown in the following figure 8.4 'distance-learning work -clustered summary table'.

Figure 8.4 Distance learning work -clustered summary table

ACTIVITY	TYPE OF ACTIVITY	ILLUSTRATIONS
Seeking	the distance learning packs were searched for sections relevant to the essay	'distance packs were looked at to see if sections related to essays...relevant parts were then done'(A) 'flicked through pack and marked out any relevant chapters'(C) 'after the first pack, I read relevant sections for essay'(D) 'following reading of the pack, did interesting activities and then looked for information relevant to assignment'(E) 'searched packs for relevant information'(F)
Prioritising	how the self-study phase was approached	'working to a deadline. Rough draft of essay done first, put away for a few days. Then pack would be done and the essay revised'(A) 'assignment addressed first'(B) 'did not do all the activities, but read through all the papers'(C) following essay completion, I went back to the packs if I had time'(D) 'concentration on essay work'(F)
Fast-tracking	the frustration of doing two modules per term	'fast-tracking meant a lot of reading was missed. Have now read back on things'(A) 'time factor between modules meant literature could not be obtained ..no time for reflection..had to cram things'(B) 'pressure of fast-tracking'(C) 'frustration at lack of time due to fast-tracking..felt whacked by the end of first year'(D) 'fast-tracking meant time for further reading was not there'(E)
Applying	the use of the distance learning packs in the work -place	'theory could be integrated to practice during the course'(B) 'distance learning packs useful for reference'(C) specialist packs used as reference material at work...collated relevant information from selected packs'(D)
Trivialising	the lack of recognition of the demands of distance-learning	'still had responsibility for work setting..even during core weeks. Distance learning seen as an easy option..I don't think anybody realised the work that was involved'(C) 'distance learning seen as an easy option...a Mickey mouse course.. more effort required than full-time friends at university'(E)
Self-directing	the effects of being able to choose an individual topic for the dissertation	'the freedom to choose the subject was helpful'(A) 'dissertation was an interesting exercise...learnt so much by doing it'(B) 'dissertation was the most useful part of the course'(C) 'dissertation..took 8 months to do but was very useful at work and very interesting'(D) 'useful doing essays rather than exams... I learn a lot more doing this'(F)

Within the practice element of the course, there was a mixed reaction to the usefulness of taught and/or supervised practice. One of the main difficulties seemed to be the awkwardness felt by a student when they had been working in the speciality for some time. This is reflected in the following figure 8.5 'the practice element of the course - clustered summary table below.

Figure 8.5: The practice component of the course - clustered summary table

<i>ACTIVITY</i>	<i>TYPE OF ACTIVITY</i>	<i>ILLUSTRATIONS</i>
Practising	The assessed placement	'difficulty of taught practice when you are already knowledgeable about the subject'(A) 'taught practice was enjoyable, but unsure of value of supervised practice'(B) 'learned more in practice about speciality. Difficulty of assessment in practice placements' (D) 'lacked confidence in specialist area at the end of the course' (E) 'enjoyment of practice placement and managerial support'(F)

The overall experience that the graduates had of being distance learners incorporated their feelings at the start of the course about returning to study and the fact that some graduates had not been in a formal educational setting for some time. There was also a slight concern about academic writing skills. There were additional problems to address for these graduates as they were the first cohort to start the course and were exposed to some teething problems. For some students, this raised the notion of value for money if things did not go to plan.

As the course progressed there was disappointment for two students who really would have preferred to undertake a full-time course. A lack of knowledge about the course structure also led to disappointment relating to the content of the course in the first part. As shown in the other sections within the data analysis, the stress of fast-tracking took its toll during the course.

By the end of the course, the students seemed to be aware that they had developed transferable skills and some of the graduates noted that they did not want to leave the course at the end.

The details of these clusters are shown in the following figure 8.6 'main experiences -clustered summary table'.

Figure 8.6 Main Experiences -Clustered Summary Table

ACTIVITY	TYPE OF ACTIVITY	ILLUSTRATIONS
Being mature	the issues facing the students at the start of the course	'being a mature student' (A) 'age and ability' (B) 'younger students have an easier time...time lapse since previous study' (C) 'being a mature student' (F)
Being apprehensive	problems facing the students at the start of the course- related to writing and the course team	'apprehensive about coming in and whether I would actually manage it. On the first morning...shall I really go?' (A) 'a lot of apprehension' (B) 'difficulty of putting thoughts on paper' (C) 'apprehensive of nurse tutors' (E) 'total inadequacy and insecurity' (F)
Writing	the assessed element of the course	'doing a dissertation' (A) 'difficulty of putting thoughts on paper and requirements of essays' (B) 'knowing what was being looked for in essays' (D) 'more assignments needed in part two' (E) 'academic procrastination in year two' (F)
Pioneering	what it is like being the first cohort of students through a course	'tended to forget we were the first group' (A) 'disastrous management module' (A) 'being the first course, there were bound to be problems' (B) 'being the first group added to the isolation' (C) 'being the first group, we made allowances for mistakes' (D) 'we made too many allowances for team mistakes...awareness of empire building...management disaster' (E) 'management...horrendous...awareness of goal-posts changing due to being the first team' (F)
Disappointing	the negative aspects of the course	'library resources' (A) 'stress in year two' (B) 'wanted to do a full-time course' (C) 'horrendous amount of work in year two' (D) 'expected specialist content in year one and expected it to be harder work. Needed to be listened to and respected...was intimidated by one member of the course team' (E) 'one team member provoked anxiety...value for money issue' (F)
Developing transferable skills	The additional learning during the course	'more assertive in meetings now' (A) 'development of library skills, raising of political awareness' (B) 'have learned how to use a library...I feel a bit more forward now' (C) 'self-confidence by end of course' (D) 'transferable skills have developed' (E)
Finishing the course	the feelings expressed by the students when they finished the course	'awful feeling when the course was over' (A) 'More knowledgeable now, not so much practical knowledge gained' (A) 'overall a positive experience' (B) 'gobbled zantac even more over the last two years. Have learned academically, but not practical skills' (C) 'didn't know what to do at the end of the course' (D) 'lacked confidence in specialist area at end of course. Looked for more challenges than course presented...strong need for success due to previous personal problems' (C) 'didn't want to leave course at the end' (F)

This part of the chapter presents the aim, method and results of the interviews carried out with the nine community supervisors. The aim of these telephone interviews was to obtain their views about the effectiveness of the practical component of the BA in Community Health Nursing course.

The specific objectives of these semi-structured telephone interviews were:

- to identify the role of the community supervisor of the practice component of the BA in Community Health Nursing
- to discuss the similarities and differences between full-time and distance learning students
- to evaluate the effectiveness of the current preparation of the community supervisor
- to determine the role of the community supervisor in a distance learning course
- to evaluate the effectiveness of a particular distance learning course.

Method

With the community supervisors, a semi-structured interview approach was developed to ensure that the main issues of relevance to the research study were addressed. One reason for having some associated structure was because the respondents were contacted by telephone. It also ensured that there was consistency in the order in which the questions were asked to each supervisor. One advantage of using the telephone to conduct interviews was the ability to contact people who were widely distributed around the country. However, this was balanced with the loss of visual contact that would occur with a face-to-face interview. All the respondents in this telephone survey were experienced telephone users and in using a semi-structured questionnaire, it was envisaged that useful data could be gathered with this approach. The interview schedule is attached as Appendix VI. As all of the community supervisors had a distance-learning student allocated to them within the past year, the terminology used in the interview should have been familiar to them. However, Fowler (1993:74) added a note of caution when saying: *'even with well educated samples, using simple words that are short and understood widely is a sound approach to questionnaire design'*.

Even though this was said with reference to questionnaire design, a similar approach was taken with the telephone interview schedule. Miller and Cannell (1992) discussed that telephone interviews are more associated with market-research interviews when random numbers are dialled. However, all the respondents were well-used to using the telephone due to the nature of their work. In this study, the potential nine respondents making up the purposeful sample were all contacted by letter to ask for their participation. This enabled a specific telephone appointment to be arranged and to obtain informed consent to the purpose of the research. The responses to the interview schedule were logged directly onto the schedule by the interviewer.

In order to obtain a matrix of the views expressed by each respondent, a role-ordered matrix as described by Miles and Huberman (1994) was used. This approach is particularly useful in displaying the views of a group of people sharing a particular role. In this instance, all respondents had supervised a distance-learning student in the previous year. The data was displayed in this matrix in order to reflect the views in an exploratory way, rather than to establish causal links between the respondents. As the data was descriptive, there was no order to the display, it was shown as recorded on the interview schedule, rather than in any categorical order. Each row represents a single case, with each respondent being allocated a pseudonym. The columns represent the variables as laid out in the interview schedule. Miles and Huberman (1994:241) recommend that no more than twelve variables are contained within any matrix. The matrix used contains nine variables. The data contained in each cell is a mixture of direct quotes as well as a summary of what was said.

A community practice teacher (CPT) who had experience in assessing community graduates from other universities was approached to participate in the pilot phase telephone interview. This person was not involved in the main interview phase. In the original interview schedule, a reference was made to the term community

supervisor which needed interpretation for the community practice teacher. The choice of community supervisor/CPT was therefore included in the final version.

The wording of question two was altered from 'Please would you describe the main functions of your role as an community supervisor' which the interviewee found daunting to 'How would you describe your role as a community supervisor/CPT?' An additional question was inserted to find out whether the interviewee enjoyed this part of their role. It was also discovered that more space was needed on the interview schedule for the answer to question two and the final schedule was amended.

Similarly, more space was needed for the answer to question five regarding the effectiveness of the preparation for being an community supervisor. Following consultation with an experienced researcher who looked at the draft version of the questionnaire, the format of this question was altered from a rating scale to a more open-ended question relating to the strengths and weaknesses of the preparation.

Question six which asked about the qualities needed to make someone an effective community supervisor was developed to include 'personal' and 'professional' qualities.

The final question which asked the interviewee to make 'any other comments' was made more specific following discussion with the interviewee. For the final version it read, 'are there any other comments you would like to suggest that would enable closer links to be made between the theory and practice components of this course?'.

It was quite difficult to take down notes while the telephone interview was on-going and for this reason, the pilot interview only lasted about ten minutes. This was also due to slight nervousness on the part of the interviewer.

Results of telephone interviews with the target group of community supervisors

All nine community supervisors participated in the telephone interviews as arranged. The first attempt at data analysis involved the scanning of the matrix to search for patterns and themes that emerged.

With regard to the role of the community supervisor, two patterns emerged from the data. The first group (n=4) described the role of community supervision as being difficult, with the other group (n=5) describing it as an enabling role.

The difficult nature of the role was described in terms of the difficulty of assessing someone's clinical skills as well as integrating the theoretical elements of a course with the practical elements. Fiona noted this difficulty in relation to the inadequacy of the documentation in use for the particular course. Isobel noted that it was more difficult for her with the allocation of part-time students, rather than the full-time students from previous courses. Rosie noted that the difficult nature of the role was associated with the ability to be critical in a constructive way and Sheena felt that it was difficult to assess someone in the work situation.

In contrast, the other pattern to emerge was the facilitation/enabling role of the community supervisor. The supervisor's role was that of gate-keeper allowing the student to experience the world of practice and meet other key members that would be useful people for the student to know. Clare saw her role as being part-mentor and part-facilitator, while Mary viewed the supervisory role as a way of encouraging the positive side of students. The enabling role was passed on to students by Brenda through role modelling, with Moira describing the role as helping the student adapt their skills from the hospital setting. Eileen saw her enabling role in terms of being a mentor/preceptor who was able to listen to and respond to the learning needs of the students.

Despite the disparity between the enabling/difficult role, all nine respondents agreed that they found this an enjoyable part of their role. The reasons given for why this was enjoyable ranged from the ability of the student to keep the supervisor up-to-date with current issues, to the handing on of skills to the next generation of community nurses. Eileen, Isobel and Moira agreed that having a student keeps them “on their toes”, although Moira noted that it was stressful as it added to the existing caseload. Sheena reported that she enjoyed teaching and the opportunity to “throw someone’s mind open”. For Rosie and Clare having a student allocated to them gave the opportunity to learn something new and found it a rewarding experience. Fiona found the students challenging as they asked questions. Brenda thought that it was “nice to see new people coming in to the profession and to be able to pass skills on”. Mary reported that it enabled her to see the links between theory and practice more clearly.

Seven community supervisors had been involved in supervising both full-time and distance-learning students with Rosie and Eileen saying that their experience was limited to distance-learning students.

The seven community supervisors that had experience of both types of student were then asked to explain any similarities and differences between the full-time and distance-learning mode of study.

Moira reported that the distance-learning student seemed to be more prepared to work alone on the academic work, whereas in her previous experience with the full-time students, they seemed to have been under a great deal of stress where their academic work was concerned. Mary felt that distance-learning students feel more isolated, but can communicate better with tutors now to discuss any problems. In comparison, the full-time students did not feel so isolated, and concentrated on work.

Brenda has not noticed any difference between the students on either full-time or distance-learning courses. They were all well-motivated and wanted to work in the community after working in hospital settings. However, Sheena said that there was an expectation that the students “should be well motivated, but that is a generalisation”. Additionally, she reported that the distance-learning students were expected to be more capable. Clare commented that she would find it hard to separate full-time and distance-learning students, adding that full-time students do not have any greater time as they have to work to keep “body and soul together”. Fiona expressed the view that it was more a question of a “good nurse getting on with other good nurses” rather than the type of course they were undertaking. Due to the isolation of the work, people needed a high degree of self-confidence. Isobel stated that she preferred having full-time students as she felt that she had more idea about the content of the programme and where the student was in the course.

Brenda, Isobel, Eileen and Moira had undertaken the Community Practice Teachers’ (CPT) course which comprised of a six week theory block and assessed practice with a student.

Isobel and Brenda both found the CPT course very helpful at the time and had enjoyed learning about the psychology of teaching. They felt that they had been well-prepared for the demands of supervision, finding that the hardest part was trying to keep up-to-date. Eileen added that the CPT course had inspired her continuing educational interests and her questioning of existing practice although she added that “the GPs don’t like the challenge!”

Moira felt that the CPT course had been a struggle for her as she was a “very mature student” when she did the course and there was a lot of work. However, it was “all right really as it contained a lot about teaching and assessing students.”

Sheena, Mary and Rosie had undertaken the six day assessors of supervised practice (ASPS) course. Clare had undertaken a one day course orientation day and felt that her previous experience had prepared her well for supervision. Fiona felt that her experience had prepared her well for community supervision and added that the assessors' course would be hard to allocate time to as it would not be income-generating.

Mary had found a lot of benefit from the social liaising with the other students on the ASPS course, and found it difficult to recall the course content. Sheena felt that the course had "highlighted certain things about supervision" and Rosie commented that it had made her "think how my patch would appear to other people and found the compilation of the practice profile very useful".

The **professional qualities** that an effective supervisor needs are high professional standards of care according to Rosie, Eileen, Brenda, Moira and Sheena. Experience and knowledge in the speciality were also mentioned by Sheena, Moira, Brenda, Clare and Fiona who added that the supervisor should be committed to the goals of the speciality.

Good interpersonal skills were another professional quality needed for effective supervision said Brenda. This was mentioned in relation to honesty in the discussion of good and bad practice by Sheena. She added that you "have to be careful not to damage or wreck someone when discussing their practice". The ability to give constructive criticism and positive feedback was mentioned by Clare within this inter-personal category. Additionally, being a good listener was another important professional skill needed by a supervisor according to Eileen. Honesty was mentioned by Brenda who noted that the supervisor has to be honest and admit that she may not know all the answers to the questions a student may have!

The need to remain objective when dealing with a student was mentioned by Rosie, Clare and Sheena who referred to this as "fairness". Rosie added that

“you have to remain detached to some extent as emotional involvement makes the assessment phase of the supervision difficult”. Sheena also raised the notion of being “open”, which was reported as being approachable by Brenda.

The interest in teaching and the commitment that having a student involves was identified by Eileen. Isobel noted that “you have to have a keen interest in your work and you have to want to teach. You realise that you can’t do it all in work and managers don’t allow enough time for the preparation”. Mary agreed with this saying that “ the workload means that you have limited time available for students”. Mary highlighted the fact that you have to have an interest in the student “even those who look bored”. Moira added that understanding is needed to realise that the student has probably made many personal sacrifices to undertake the course.

The **personal qualities required for the role of supervisor** that were specified by three of the community supervisors were the need to have a good sense of humour (Moira), assertiveness skills (Eileen) and self-confidence (Isobel).

The facility to learn while remaining in the workplace was definitely a **positive** feature of distance learning. This was mentioned by Sheena, with Brenda saying that because of this, education became available to more people. Mary agreed with this view saying that it opened up educational opportunities. Additionally, Fiona thought that the concept of distance learning was quite exciting as it saved the need for commuting away for education. Isobel identified that distance learning is of benefit to students living in remote areas. Rosie felt that learning while working enabled consolidation of practice to occur, making it particularly useful in the application of theory to practice. She felt that this approach would help both new and experienced practitioners. Eileen felt that that there was a more conducive atmosphere to learning in one’s own surroundings and that it was a cheaper option than being away from home for any length of time.

The ability to progress through the course at an individual pace was also noted as a positive feature by Brenda. Eileen noted that distance learning enabled the student to “go at your own level and time”. Moira mentioned the high motivation that a person needs to have to complete a distance learning course as being a positive feature of this type of education.

However, the need for extra student support due to the fact that the student is on their own was mentioned by Isobel as a **negative** feature of distance learning. She recognised the fact that the student can feel very isolated. Eileen also identified this isolation, but referred to it in relation to being isolated from peers. This was a negative feature because of the learning that takes place from peers. Sheena also noted that the limited time spent in college may be a negative feature of distance education. This isolation also affects the possibilities of accessing the literature and the tutor, according to Eileen.

Eileen also mentioned the need for the student to be a good time-manager and self-disciplined as it would be easy to “put things off” when the student was isolated from the course. Rosie also felt that the time available for studying when studying by distance learning may be difficult. Brenda recognised that the pressure of undertaking a course on top of a job might put undue pressure on a student, and that this may affect those students who are being seconded.

This isolation may also affect the motivational level of the student according to Eileen. This view about the motivation of students was also mentioned by Mary who noted that the motivation has to be strong due to the isolation.

Clare recognised the potential for the lack of communication when the student and tutor are not in daily face-to-face contact. She said that a more meaningful dialogue can occur when you know who you are talking to. Fiona also felt that access to tutorial staff, library material and the assessor may be a negative feature of distance education. Brenda added that it may be difficult to find resource packs in remote areas.

The effectiveness of the distance learning course in educating community nurses was rated as follows:

- One supervisor rated the course as 5 (very effective)
- Five supervisors rated the course as 4

However, three supervisors did not feel they could give an answer to this question. One supervisor in particular rated it in two ways, depending on the experience in the speciality of the student.

The community supervisors suggested the following issues that they feel would enable closer links to be made between the theoretical and practical components of the course.

Fiona felt that the issue of payment should be addressed with regard to clinical placements. The written work should be realistic to the workplace setting and greater use should be made of the expert knowledge that exists in the workplace. Clare also felt that the practice placement assessment form should be connected with theory. Rosie mentioned the need for the placement form to be more formal to ensure standardisation across the specialities.

Mary suggested that practice placements need to be carefully audited to ensure the standard of the placement. She also felt that a pre-assessment meeting between the student and community supervisor would enable a needs assessment to be carried out before the placement began. Moira agreed with this point, saying that each student needs to be seen as an individual to determine what their needs are.

A need to be fully informed about the syllabus and the assessment schedule that the students undertake was made by Mary, Eileen and Isobel. This would ensure that they kept up-to-date with the course and mode of delivery.

Sheena felt that the 'networking' of supervisors and academic staff would enable closer links to be made, suggesting that clinical sessions for staff would enhance these links. Sheena also recognised the value in good working relationships being fostered between academic staff and the community supervisors. Fiona also shared the view that speaking to tutors was of benefit. Brenda felt that the communication links were strong and she was "catered for quite well" by being involved in the course development at various stages. This open communication enabled access to tutorial staff if there were any difficulties. Clare recommended the development of closer links between tutors and community supervisors. Eileen valued the networking that occurs with her peers at the regular community supervisors' meetings. The legend for the matrix is outlined below, with the abbreviations used in the headings of the matrix shown in bold typeface. This also shows the questions contained in the interview schedule.

- **role** relates to question one, how would you describe your role as an assessor/CPT?
- **enjoy** relates to question two, do you enjoy this aspect of your role?
- **F.T and D.L.** relates to question three, have you had experience of assessing full-time students as well as distance-learning students?
- **preparation** refers to question four, what preparation have you had to enable you to assess students?
- **st/weakness** relates to question five, can you tell me what the strengths and weaknesses of this preparation have been?
- **quals.** relates to question six, what professional and personal qualities do you think are needed to make someone an effective assessor?
- **pos. & neg.** relates to question seven, in your opinion, what are the positive and negative features about distance education for community nurses?
- **scale** relates to the scale of 1 to 5 (1= very ineffective and 5= very effective) that the respondents were asked in order to rate the effectiveness of the BA in Community Health Nursing in the education of community nurses.

- **comments** relates to the final question which asked for any comments that could be suggested to enable closer links to be made between the theory and practice components of the BA in Community Health Nursing.

Summaries of the results can be seen overleaf in figure 8.7.

Figure 8.7 Summary display Of Community Supervisors' responses about their role with distance-learning students

NAME	ROLE	F.T.& D.L.	PREPARATI ON	ST/WEAKNE SS	QUALS.	POS. &NEG.	COMMENTS
Isobel	Guiding and supporting/ more than practical work	yes	Cpt course approx. 10 yrs. ago and diploma in nursing by distance learning	Helpful to learn about educational theory and the benefits of being prepared for the student. Keeping up-to-date is difficult though	Professional qualities include having a keen interest in work and wanting to teach. Personal qualities include self-confidence, rapport listening and being with them	Good for remote areas, encourages continuing study. Family commitments, isolation and extra support needed are negative features	Meeting students before specialist part. More contact with course team and material. Need for familiarisation with changes in education
Eileen	Enabling the student, having local knowledge, assessing student	no-full-time only	Cpt course 1991, reading, meetings with other colleagues, in-service education	Remoteness from other colleagues on cpt course, but inspiration for interest in professional issues	Professional interests, standards, motivation and continuing education. Personal include being assertive, good listener and using inter-personal skills carefully	Positive features -to be able to go at own pace and level, can fit into lifestyle and conducive to learning in own surroundings. Negative features nclude being isolated from peers, lack of literature and the student needs to be able to motivate themselves	More details about the content of the course. ongoing updating of skills and knowledge
Fiona	Necessary evil only clinical skills should be assessed in practice	yes	Over 6 years experience and working alongside students. Assessors' course not deemed to be relevant	-	Commitment to goals of practice, have to be in current practice, although the reality is that such individuals are few and far between	Positive features - a wonderful idea to avoid commuting away. Negative features access to library, tutor and assessor	Course needs to be much more relevant to the work setting of the student. Payment for placements needs to be addressed. People in education are out of touch with the real world and the language needed to assess someone.
Rosie	Difficult role, need to be able to give constructive criticism in order to develop practice	no-distance learners only	Asps course 1992	Very valuable being a multi-disciplinary course although it was linked to specialist practice. Compiling a practice profile was very useful	Professional- high standards of practice. Personal - to be able to remain detached as emotional involvement makes assessment harder	A good way to consolidate practice and enables the application of education to practice. The negative features are the available time for studying while working	Need for a more formal assessment programme to bring all community specialities into line. Need to incorporate structured teaching of practical elements

Figure 8.7 Continued

NAME	ROLE	F.T & D.L	PREPARATI ON	ST/WEAKNESS	QUALS.	POS. & NEG.	COMMENTS
Sheena	Supervisory role as well as assessing although this is difficult in the work setting	yes	Asps course 1993	Highlighted certain relevant issues	Personal qualities - fairness and truthfulness, being able to acknowledge good and bad practice. High standards. Using experience Professional - careful auditing of placements Personal - honesty, patience and interest in the students Experience and knowledge, objectivity, being able to give constructive criticism and feedback	Good idea as learning takes place within the workplace. Negative - can be very expensive and there is limited time to be with other students	Closer links with practical placements. The need for academics to undertake clinical sessions. Close links through communication and networking
Mary	Important role in the encouragement of students	yes	Asps course in 1993	Difficult to recall content, but had a sociable time with other students!	Personal - honesty, patience and interest in the students Experience and knowledge, objectivity, being able to give constructive criticism and feedback	Positive - gives people a chance of education and opens up opportunities. Negative - the motivation has to be very strong due to the isolation. It is the only option for many students without access to day release course. Negative feature may be the lack of face to face contact with tutor	Placement profiles, pre-meeting with student and assessor to help with programme planning. More details about course content and assessment schedule Closer integration between the theoretical and practical elements of the course
Clare	Part mentor, facilitator	yes	APEL, and 1 day course	Insight into course content and psychology of reflective learning. Planning to undertake a mentor's course but time is short	Experience, understanding, kindness, patience and sense of humour. A high standard of care is needed	Positive - students are highly motivated and want to do the course. Negative - you learn your trade on the job, and a happy medium has to be kept between theory and practice	The need for each student to be seen as an individual to determine their particular needs
Moir	To introduce the student to the community setting, and assisting in the adaptation of existing skills	yes	Cpt course approx 8 yrs ago	A lot of work involved in course. Geared to the teaching and assessing of students alright really	Experience, understanding, kindness, patience and sense of humour. A high standard of care is needed	Positive - students are highly motivated and want to do the course. Negative - you learn your trade on the job, and a happy medium has to be kept between theory and practice	The need for each student to be seen as an individual to determine their particular needs
Brenda	Role model and enabler	yes	Cpt course approx 10 years ago	Difficult to recall, insight into theories of learning and teaching- enlightening and helpful	Excellence in caring, good interpersonal skills and an ability to deal with ethical situation. Personal qualities should be approachable, helpful, calm, experienced and knowledgeable. Honesty in admitting if you do not know something.	Excellent way to make education available to more people. Ability to go at own pace. Negative - the pressure to complete if being seconded and the pressure of working and studying at the same time. Access to resource material may be difficult in some areas	There is ready access to tutor if there are any difficulties, catered for quite well

This final section of the chapter presents the method and results of the academic colleagues' interviews. The overall aim of these semi-structured, face-to-face interviews was to evaluate the effectiveness of this distance learning course.

The specific objectives were:

- to determine the effectiveness of a distance-learning course for community nurses
- to obtain opinions of academic staff of how such a course could become more effective

This would also help to identify those items which could be determined as assisting or hindering effectiveness. This data could then be used in conjunction with the data gathered from the graduate and supervisor interviews to help in the triangulation of data.

Because the nature of the academic staff interviews was exploratory, the data were displayed following coding via a checklist matrix. As Miles and Huberman (1994:105) note, this is an ideal way to display data that focuses on one particular issue. In this case, that issue was the effectiveness of the distance-learning course. In this display, the tutors have been separated into those people who work full-time on the distance-learning course (identified as internal tutors) and those staff from other schools within the university who provide service teaching over a range of courses (identified as external tutors). An overall effectiveness assessment was made by the author based on the items mentioned by the respondents. This would give an opportunity to see at a glance whether the particular academic thought the course was effective or not. The terms used ranged from 'ineffective' 'could be effective' to 'effective'.

Each tutor identified in this purposeful sample of seven was written to explaining the nature and purpose of the research. The reason for writing to each potential respondent was to obtain informed consent and the purpose of

the research. The researcher thought that such written permission would allow each respondent to decide whether to participate more fully. The interviews were planned with a semi-structured schedule (Appendix VII) , to ensure there was consistency with the interviews. It was intended that the interviewer would review the issues raised by the respondent at the end of each interview to ensure the accuracy of the notes taken.

A colleague who would not be involved in the final interview sample was invited to undertake the pilot interview. This interview consisted of a schedule of topic areas with the interviewer taking notes. It lasted approximately forty minutes and a wide range of subject areas were addressed. Following discussion with the interviewee, some minor modifications were made to three of the original questions to make them more specific. An additional question was inserted to discover whether support was offered by the academic staff member to other colleagues.

However, on reflection following this pilot phase, it was realised that the focus of the pilot interview had broadened to other areas than stated in the aim of this part of the study. For this reason, the interview schedule was completely revised to be shorter and to concentrate on the effectiveness of the distance-learning course under study. The first question that these colleagues were asked was : *'In terms of the quality of educational experience, how effective do you think the BA in Community Health Nursing by distance learning is?* This was followed by the second question which was *Please would you comment on how the BA in Community Health Nursing could become more effective, in your opinion.*

Results

Academic 'G'

In terms of the effectiveness of the course, 'G' replied that it depended on how you measure quality and that if you went by your own traditional university preparation it was very different. The students missed out on the culture of university. However, the course was able to introduce students to new concepts, so it was quite successful. Additionally, there was more attention to

the quality of students' work, which was very different from personal experience) and on the long-term development of the constructs of argument. The distance learning format gave wider access to higher education. This entry to education may lead on to the formation of the education habit, promoting the need for ongoing education.

The role of the tutor was very different on a distance learning course. 'G' noted that you were more of an entrepreneur than an educator. There was a need for academics to show humility to recognise the change of culture that the student was faced with at the start of the course. Due to the nature of the course, it was difficult to have a tutorial relationship with students. With another part-time course that 'G' was familiar with, a lot of networking and student self-support occurred and 'G' was concerned that this might not happen on the distance learning course. Networking was something that should be fostered and encouraged and was something that is not often addressed in conventional higher educational settings.

The distance-learning pack was not the easiest way to put across findings as well as viewpoints. In 'G's' opinion, nurses were quite hard to teach as they have hard scientific knowledge backgrounds and the concepts of holism might be difficult for them to address. In addition, the large numbers in the 'core weeks' (i.e. the required periods of university attendance) made interactive forms of teaching difficult, so didactic methods were resorted to. The notion of value for money was present when students wanted a full timetable.

Academic 'H'

'H' replied that this course was the same as any course as it depended on the student and their ability to contact tutorial staff for help. This was similar in full-time courses as well. The difference with distance learning was that due to the remoteness, there may be a higher chance of students not asking for help. In addition, with the telephone tutorial system, the body language could not be seen e.g. 'you can't see the question marks above the heads'. This meant that

tutorial staff had to work a lot harder to anticipate the sorts of questions that a student may ask and that the knowledge base of the student may be over-estimated. There was a huge variation in the educational stage of the students. 'H' had been involved with the first year of the course and said that the first year was bound to cause problems which was termed as the 'guinea-pig syndrome'. 'H' noted that in similarity to a full-time course, it was up to the student what they did with the distance learning material.

Academic 'I'

'I' identified that this course was less effective than other courses as the students did not understand the requirements of distance learning. The influence of the student's previous educational experience was so overpowering that they had to be disabused of it. This influence meant that the students wanted a receptive style of learning which was more of a problem in distance education as it went against the principles of participative learning. 'I' had knowledge of distance learning in another country which was much more of a multi-dimensional approach. It gave adequate time for resourcing, time and development. Material that was both bought-in and commissioned was used in this other system and there was variety in the approach with the use of audio, video and educational broadcasts on television. In addition, many students had access to computers so computer-based learning could be developed.

Within this course, the core weeks did not offer enough contact with the students as people don't stay for the week and the expectations of the students were unrealistic. Due to the wide knowledge base of students, the teaching was difficult. The facilities to contact students once they were on the distance learning phase of the course should be addressed to improve the contact.

The distance-learning pack would be better if replaced by a sound text to give the students a common base. In addition, 'I' felt that the assignment was not very appropriate as it did not demonstrate academic skills. In addition, the avoidance of subjectivity in the marking was difficult. Perhaps a self-

administered objective test in addition to the evaluation of a technical paper would be more suitable.

Overall, 'I' identified that the academic level was lower now than on the previous full-time course. With the high student expectation, 'I' noted that tutoring staff were faced with a no-win situation. However, there was a need for all academics to look at academic standards generally.

Despite these comments, 'I' felt that distance learning could be effective if time was allocated to it. The difficulty with current students was their opinion that a degree can be picked up 'en passant'. In addition, distance learning was the only way to offer education to a wider audience.

Academic 'J'

'J' found this quite difficult to answer being fairly new to the course, but identified that it depended on what the students put in to it. This was shown by the fast-trackers and the amount of time they had to complete the work. One of the strengths of distance learning within a speciality was the ability to link theory to practice almost immediately and furthermore, the packs could be used as a permanent resource. However, 'J' felt that not everyone was capable of degree-level work.

The period of supervised practice should offer a rounded experience, relevant to the needs of the student. There was a difficulty with the current preparation of the supervisors as not everyone had time to undertake the short course and in addition, they were asking 'what's in it for us?' In 'J's' opinion, there was a lack of understanding about the course. On a previous course, there had been a mentorship scheme where the mentors were reimbursed. However, this did not work very well as there was often a misunderstanding of the role, leaving the students rather confused.

The first generic part of the course may have made the application of theory to practice difficult for those students new to the speciality. Some issues such as

the need for proaction are not really addressed in the course. However, the core weeks were seen as being important both for staff as well as students.

The library facilities were improving all the time, but not really keeping pace with the increasing number of students. Perhaps the expectations of the students were rather unrealistic. One strength of the course was the amount of written feedback that the students received and that students could contact staff by telephone.

Academic 'K'

'K' felt that the course had the potential to be of high quality, but on occasion, the resourcing issues could affect this. This was evident in the lack of preparation for those staff involved in the teaching and tutoring of the distance learning students. In addition, there were attitudinal problems which meant that some staff had negative feelings about working with adults and distance learners. Another resource issue was the time available to staff to spend with students and the number of students that a tutor had allocated to them.

The notion of distance learning was very effective due to its flexibility and recognition of the needs of students who are unable to study on a full-time basis. The needs of a predominantly female student population could also be addressed. This was shown in the consideration of educational needs by the course leaders to take account of the various stages that each student was at.

The core weeks were deemed essential by 'K'. This was to establish and build upon the working relationship between the student and the tutor; the mutual support that students could provide and the ability to participate in group-work.

The provision of reading material could be better, and 'K' felt that this was not addressed by the university as a whole. Perhaps texts could be included as core reading and there could be more reciprocity with other libraries.

In relation to the distance learning material, 'K' identified that there was no potential reason why it was any less effective than the more traditional classroom delivery. The importance of quality assurance was vital and this would be shown in material that was well-prepared, regularly updated and renewed. Such material allowed for the students to work at their own pace with support from tutors. In addition, the pack could be used as a reference later on. One of the strengths of distance learning was its great potential for linking theory to practice. Within this, the tutoring staff could help to apply this theory.

The practice placements were problematic as not all the practitioners had kept themselves up-to-date. 'K' thought that were a combination of reasons for this, including apathy and resourcing issues in clinical practice. In addition, there was not always the support from nurse managers.

'K' addressed the utility of a mentorship scheme with the community supervisor fulfilling this role. Where there was only a supervised placement, an additional mentor may well be needed.

Academic 'L'

'L' felt that the course was very valuable to those students who were not 'fast-tracking' (this refers to students doing the first six modules over one academic year). The fast-trackers had no time to internalise material and were flooded with new information. 'L' compared students undertaking more traditional full-time undergraduate programmes and indicated that it would be more useful to do this course without the additional commitments that so many students have. At first, there was respect for the quality of your own previous education as a benchmark, but distance learning could be just as effective. It showed a move to student-centred active learning. This was far less prescriptive and empowered people to learn. The majority of the students on the course had to manage family, work and study. However, they also had a lot of experience to draw on for help.

The core weeks, which were vital, enabled students to share experiences as well as identify individual differences. In addition, the tutorial conversations enabled students to develop confidence, especially if they were quiet. The tutorial relationship was developed better when there was a 'known face'.

The distance learning material was not of a high-enough quality, according to 'L'. The compilation of such material was highly specialised and could be quite daunting for the novice teacher. Some of the material was unimaginative in linking theory to practice. This was achieved more through the assignments. Tutorials could also help to make the links between modules and gave the student feelings of empowerment.

The clinical component of the course was the weak area of the course. Strong links with clinical practice were fundamental, and this could prove to be extremely difficult if the placements were dispersed geographically. Some of the supervisors had little awareness of the needs of students creating a practice-theory gap. This made the integration of the theory difficult for the student if there was such a lack of understanding about the structure and content of the course. The role of the mentor may provide additional confusion, if they were unclear about their role. In 'L's' opinion, any mentoring scheme should be left as an informal network developed, if wanted, by the student.

Academic 'M'

'M' thought that the course was of variable effectiveness due to a range of reasons. There was a basic mis-match of the core week and the distance-learning material with the students being tempted to see the residential component as a 'microcosm' of the whole module. This meant that the core week failed to live up to the expectations and wishes (as opposed to the needs) of the students and served as a source of dissatisfaction for the tutoring staff.

The next area that had a bearing on the effectiveness, according to 'M', was the telephone tutorial system. Some students seemed to take advantage of it,

but was unable to pinpoint why this might be so. 'M' felt that there was a general uncertainty among students about how to use it.

The process of assessment also affected the course, in 'M's' opinion, especially the process of letting students submit drafts. This meant that there was a chance that the tutoring staff would be 'held to ransom' by a student who would keep submitting drafts so that they did not fail. This was an issue that needed to be addressed in many modular courses as the lecturer could be compromised. One way of improving the assessment phase would be to hold an examination during one of the core weeks. 'M' felt that this would show that it was not too easy to get a degree by distance learning and that perhaps tutoring staff were too tolerant. In addition, such a system would enable progression to be made to the second part of the course by those students who were academically able to progress. This would protect the devaluing of degrees that was happening at the moment. 'M' felt that the reason for this devaluation was due to education being seen as a commodity, rather than a process which was happening across the board in higher education.

Another factor which hindered the effectiveness of the course was the lack of understanding shown by some professionals who did not appreciate the rigours of academic life. In 'M's' opinion, the possession of professional qualifications alone did not hold good for academic life as the experience may be flawed.

Three main themes emerged from the data following the coding progress. The coded were grouped into areas of similarity . The three themes were:

- the learning opportunities for the students
- the tutor's role
- quality issues

Summaries of the findings in respect of these three themes and the assessment of how the academics interpreted the given definition of effectiveness are given in figures 8.9, 8.10, and 8.11 in the form of matrix tables.

Figure 8.9 Checklist Matrix On Effectiveness Factors - The Learning Opportunities

CONDITION	INTERNAL TUTORS	EXTERNAL TUTORS
Introduction of new concepts	effective according to 'G' and 'L' - students can internalise material	
the development of transferable skills	effective according to 'G' as attention was paid to the quality of student writing as well as to the development of argument construction.	ineffective according to 'I' as the written work did not demonstrate academic skills.
wider access to education	effective according to 'G' due to the distance -learning format. effective according to 'K' due to " its flexibility and recognition of the needs of students who cannot study full-time".	could be effective according to 'M' as the academic standard of degree courses should be maintained
clinical placements	could be effective 'J' said that not all supervisors keep themselves up-to-date or understand the course. 'K' added that there was not always the support from nurse managers. 'L' noted that links with the clinical placements are fundamental.	
distance learning material	effective 'J' noted that the packs could be used as a permanent resource. 'K' identified that well-prepared, updated distance-learning material was just as effective as classroom delivery. could be effective 'L' noted that imaginative distance-learning material could help link theory to practice. In addition, the preparation of the material was highly specialised. ineffective 'G' identified that the pack was not the easiest way to put across findings as well as opinion.	ineffective 'I' noted that the distance-learning material would be better replaced by a sound text.
core weeks	effective essential for students and staff said 'J'. 'K' said the tutorial relationship could be built upon 'L' added that the student was able to share experiences with other students. ineffective 'G' reported that the large numbers in the core weeks made interactive teaching difficult.	ineffective 'I' said that the students do not stay long enough and have unrealistic expectations of the week.
networking and mutual student support	effective 'K' mentioned the networking and mutual support that students could provide during the core weeks. could be effective 'G' was slightly concerned that the networking and mutual support by students would not occur in distance-learning	
previous experience and expectations of the students	could be effective 'K' identified that tutorial staff considered the individual needs of students to take account of their various 'stages'. 'L' identified that the students had a lot of previous experience that they could draw upon. ineffective 'G' identified that students expected didactic teaching because of their previous educational experience. 'J' pointed out that not everyone is able to study at degree level	could be effective 'H' noted the vast range of educational stage of the students. ineffective 'I' the influence of previous educational experience was overwhelming and not conducive to receptive learning. 'M' identified that students had unrealistic expectations about the core weeks due to their previous educational experience.
Integration of theory to practice	effective according to 'J' and 'K' 'L' pointed out that the integration is achieved through the assignment and tutorial system.	

Figure 8.10 Checklist Matrix On Effectiveness Factors - The Tutor’s Role

CONDITION	INTERNAL TUTORS	EXTERNAL TUTORS
adaptation of the role of the tutor	<p>effective 'G' noted that “you had to be more of an entrepreneur than an educator” .</p> <p>'I' mentioned that one of the strengths of the course was the feedback given to the students and the availability of the tutor.</p> <p>'L' added that the tutor can help make the links between the modules and empower the learning of the students.</p> <p>ineffective 'K' felt that some staff were unprepared for the demands of working with distance learners. In addition, 'K' reported that “ there are attitudinal problems which meant that some staff had negative feelings about working with adults and distance learners” .</p>	<p>could be effective 'H' identified that the tutor had to able to anticipate the questions that a student may ask.</p> <p>'M' identified that the use of the telephone tutorial system was unclear to some students.</p>
the tutorial relationship	<p>effective 'K' recognised the individual approach taken with each student</p> <p>'L' identified that the tutorial relationship could offer the empowerment for students to learn.</p> <p>could be effective 'G' recognised that it might be difficult to build up a trusting relationship between the student and tutor.</p>	<p>could be effective 'H' noted that the remoteness of students may prevent them from seeking help.</p>
mentoring	<p>could be effective the supervisor could undertake this role according to 'L' .</p> <p>ineffective roles were misunderstood according to 'J' . The mentor may add confusion for the student and should be left to develop if the student wants, said 'L' .</p>	

Figure 8.11 Checklist Matrix On Effectiveness Factors - Quality Issues

CONDITION	INTERNAL TUTOR	EXTERNAL TUTOR
Resourcing issues	<p><u>could be effective</u> 'J' commented that while the library is improving, it is not keeping pace with the increased student numbers..</p> <p>'K' added that there was no preparation for tutorial staff involved with the course</p>	
developmental time		<p><u>could be effective</u> 'I' was aware of other distance-learning courses where time was allocated for development of a wide range of material.</p>
academic standards	<p><u>could be effective</u> 'J' identified that not all students were capable of a degree and this should be recognised.</p>	<p><u>could be effective</u> 'M'felt that the students should sit an examination to allow them to progress to the second part of the degree. This would protect the academic standard.</p>
ongoing review of modules	<p>'<u>could be effective</u> 'K' noted the need to ensure quality of material by regularly reviewing material.</p>	

To improve the effectiveness of the course, the respondents raised the following issues.

Academic 'G'

'G' suggested that networking should be encouraged among the students. This could be done by linking students in the same geographical location. The resource issue had to be addressed with particular reference to the provision of library books and the policy for distance learning students. This applied to the recall of books and the number of items that could be loaned. Attention could be paid to improving on-line computer facilities for students which was a potentially important development, according to 'G'. Video-conferencing could help tutorials and reciprocal arrangements could be made to help students access machines.

The students had to be encouraged to initiate contact with tutorial staff. In 'G's' opinion, it was the 'pushy' and confident students who got the benefits from tutorial support. The lack of contact may make it difficult for a relationship to develop between the student and the tutor, as trust, which is the key to such a relationship took such a long time to develop.

Academic 'H'

'H' recognised that attention had to be paid to the consistency of advice and the writing style expected of the students. Students had to be able to understand the rules. For many students, the purpose and the audience for written work is unclear. Perhaps there was some scope for the development of a variety of assessments. Another issue that would enhance the effectiveness of the course was the ongoing development of time management and study skills so that students had a clear idea of the length of time needed for reading and writing.

Academic 'I'

'I' identified the need for students to have clearer expectations of distance learning as well as the need to learn about active learning. That applied to students, academic staff and employers. As highlighted above, if students were expecting to be passive learners, they expect the 'knowledge' to be passed to them which is taxing. Instead, there should be a development of knowledge that was meaningful to them.

The other main improvement would be in the developmental time given to staff. The notion that you can 'cobble a course together by Tuesday week is ridiculous'.

Academic 'J'

'J' highlighted the lack of development time for staff working on the course and identified that the course could be more effective with the use of newer technology to enhance data retrieval and communication. In addition, there was a concern expressed that the student numbers might increase so much that the quality was compromised.

Academic 'K'

'K' identified that the recognition of the administrative burden of distance learning had to be recognised both at a department and university level. The establishment of a specialist department would enhance this. In addition, staff needed dedicated time for planning, reviewing and designing courses.

The tutorial staff needed to have relevant professional and educational experience as well as staff development in the theory of distance learning. The special skills were:

- the ability to conceptualise learning over a long period
- the understanding of a student-centred approach to learning to enable work to occur on a one-to-one basis

- skills in the preparation of distance learning material and desk-top publishing.

Currently, the distance learning packs were not very attractive or sophisticated. Other quality issues should be addressed which included the optimum number of students allocated to individual tutors. In addition, the attempt to balance educational standards to those of the purchasers was constantly changing and while the course was meeting them at the moment, there was no room for complacency.

Academic 'L'

'L' wondered if the system of core week followed by the distance-learning phase could be reviewed with the possibility of 'turning it on its head'. This would enable students to get a grounding in the subject matter, followed by a final core week which would be offered at a more advanced level.

The issue of the quality of the distance-learning material needed to be addressed. 'L' commented that some of it was 'fish and chip' quality. It was recognised that the provision of a full set of reading material might make students reluctant to seek out information themselves. Perhaps there needed to be more of a mix and match approach to enable students to read while they were undertaking the distance-learning pack as well as for their assignment work.

Related to the resource issue was the need for some dedicated time and effort to undertake editorial functions- there was a need for dedicated staff to do this. In respect of the difficulties within clinical placements, 'L' welcomed the introduction of PREP which would enable people to demonstrate the updating that they were doing.

Organisations which develop and offer distance learning courses needed to be aware that distance learning was not an easy option where half-baked ideas and half-written papers provided 'a nice little earner'.

The constraints of the type of learner had to be recognised and gender was an issue to be considered. An example of this would be physical access to libraries. Perhaps there could be a repertoire of journal articles available for students.

In addition, the structure of the core week could be addressed to give the students a dedicated reading day, with access to CD-ROMs being made.

The length of the course needed to be reviewed as there is an overloading of work in the second part of the course. The students needed to be aware of the complexities of the course before they started and 'L' questioned the appropriateness of the information currently given to students.

Academic 'M'

'M' identified the need to address the issue of the assessment procedure which could be more targeted and purposeful. In addition, a formal examination would help decide the suitability of those students who were able to progress to the second part of the course.

The timing of the distance-learning material and the core week should be addressed, according to 'M'. It would be better to read the pack first, then hold the residential week at the 'mid-point' of the module. This would mean that students could clarify any points within the pack, then the core week could be more focused as there would be an understanding of what the students' knowledge base was. This would acknowledge the previous knowledge and experience of the students which was often rather negative or defensive.

In addition, there had to be time set aside to review the distance learning material as well as the content of the core week. Stronger links could be made to the students' clinical work.

The final comment that 'M' made in relation to the quality of the course was the potential for the backlash from the profession if quality control measures were not addressed.

The data were coded again and were grouped into similar topic areas as before. Three main themes emerged from this grouping exercise which were:

- resourcing
- information-giving to students
- quality issues

Summaries of the findings in respect of these three themes are given in figures 8.12, 8.13 and 8.14 in the form of checklist matrix tables.

This concludes the presentation of the results of the second stage of the research. The discussion of the findings is presented in the next chapter.

Figure 8.12 Checklist Matrix On Factors That Could Make Course More Effective - Resourcing

CONDITION	INTERNAL TUTORS	EXTERNAL TUTORS
developmental time	'J' highlighted the need for more development time 'K' and 'L' said that staff needed dedicated development time for the planning, review and designing of courses.	'I' identified that is was ridiculous that "you can cobble a course together by Tuesday week" 'M' suggested that time had to be set aside to review the distance-learning material.
provision of resources	'G' noted that the availability of library books and the policy for distance learners should be addressed. In addition, along with 'J', 'L' noted the issue of access of many students to library facilities. newer initiatives such as video-conferencing and on-line technology could be investigated.	
staff development	the administrative burden of organising a distance-learning course and the need for on-going staff development was needed, according to 'K'.	

Figure 8.13 Checklist Matrix On Factors That Could Make Course More Effective - Informing Students

CONDITIONS	INTERNAL TUTORS	EXTERNAL TUTORS
Letting students know about the demands of distance-learning	'L' felt that students needed more details about the complexities of the course before they started it.	'I' identified that students needed to have clearer expectations about the course and active learning before they started.
obtaining support	'G' noted that students should be encouraged to network with other students as well as contacting their tutor.	'H' identified the need to give students consistent advice.
development of transferable skills		'H' noted that the ongoing study skills workshops would enhance learning. In addition, the students had to have the rationale for the type of assignment that they were being asked to do. 'I' identified the need for meaningful learning strategies to be used. 'M' noted that the assessment phase should be more focused.

Figure 8.14 Checklist Matrix On Factors That Could Make Course More Effective - Quality Issues

CONDITIONS	INTERNAL TUTORS	EXTERNAL TUTORS
the distance-learning material	<p>'K' noted that the packs could be more imaginative and sophisticated.</p> <p>'L' commented that some of the material was of 'fish and chip quality'.</p>	
the structure of the course	<p>'L' commented that the core week would be better at the end of the module</p>	<p>'M' noted that the core week would be better in the middle of the module.</p>
fitness for purpose	<p>'K' recognised the need for the on-going balancing of the course for the purchasers.</p> <p>'L' welcomed the introduction of PREP which would assist in the audit of placements</p>	<p>'M' felt that the progression of students needed to be addressed. In addition, there was a concern about the professional backlash if the standard of education was not maintained.</p>

CHAPTER NINE: ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS OF THE EXPERIENCES OF BEING INVOLVED WITH A DISTANCE-LEARNING COURSE

Introduction

The overall aim of the interviews was to gain further understanding of distance learning from the perspective of the first cohort of graduates, the community supervisors and academic colleagues involved with a distance learning community nursing course. This chapter presents an analysis and discussion of the interviews.

Analysis of the objectives

Separate objectives were set within each section of chapter eight, but they are considered together here. The first three relate to the graduate interviews, the next five refer to the community supervisors and the final two relate to the academic colleague interviews.

Objective 1. The evaluation of the overall experience of being a distance learner.

This objective was achieved within the individual graduate data and the categories identified in the 'overall experiences' and 'strengths and weaknesses' clusters. The graduates gave very full details of what it was like to be a distance learner.

Objective 2. The identification of the particular areas of support needed by a distance learner This objective was achieved in the findings obtained in the interview data and is displayed in the cluster analysis which demonstrated the support obtained from other students and academic staff.

Objective 3. The determination of the effective way of linking theory to practice and the role of the community supervisor. This objective was not fully explored within the graduate interviews, but was referred to by the community supervisors and academic colleagues during their interviews. The graduates did talk about their clinical placements, but the issues related to this objective were not specifically raised.

Objective 4. The identification of the role of the community supervisor in the practice component of a distance learning community nursing course This objective was achieved in the community supervisor interviews as the respondents gave a full description of their role, highlighting areas of difficulty, as well as the more enjoyable aspects of the role.

Objective 5. The discussion of the similarities and differences between full-time and distance learning students. This objective was achieved in the interviews as seven of the community supervisors had experience of both types of students and were able to offer a comparison.

Objective 6. The evaluation of the effectiveness of the current preparation of the community supervisor. The community supervisors were able to reflect on their preparation for their supervisory roles, enabling the achievement of this objective.

Objective 7. The determination of the role of a community supervisor in a distance-learning course. This objective was achieved as the community supervisors discussed the role of the supervisor as mentioned above, as well as discussing the personal and professional qualities of such a role.

Objective 8. The evaluation of the effectiveness of a particular distance learning course. This objective was not achieved as some community supervisors found it difficult to evaluate the effectiveness of the course. One of the respondents felt that it depended on the student.

Objective 9. The determination of the effectiveness of a distance-learning course for community nurses. This objective was achieved in the academic colleague interviews. Unlike the community supervisors, the effectiveness was discussed openly. It was particularly helpful to define the term 'effectiveness' at the start of each interview.

Objective 10. The obtainment of the opinions of how such a course could become more effective. This objective was achieved as the academic colleagues discussed a range of issues that could increase the effectiveness of a distance-learning course.

Analysis of the interview methodology

The three types of interview approaches that were used in stage two of the research project were appropriate for the set objectives. The methodology that was used did enable a full description to be made of the varying perspectives of the effectiveness of distance learning. As Woolcott (1994) notes, such description is the cornerstone of qualitative research. An enormous amount of data were gathered during the graduate interviews and the amount of time that was needed for the data processing and subsequent analysis was underestimated. It did, however, allow a real depth of analysis to be undertaken as identified by Rutman (1984).

In addition, the decision to display the data as recommended by Miles and Huberman (1994) enabled the findings to be emphasised clearly. The author was accepted as a knowledgeable interviewer and as can be seen from the results, the graduates expressed their own feelings, both positive and negative. This is supportive of the use of the interview setting to gather detailed information about a topic (Clemens-Johnson 1977). The single interviewer approach ensured consistency during the data gathering stage and it is contended that data distortion did not occur (Dexter 1970). The only concern was not receiving feedback from one of the students about the transcript of the interview at the data processing stage. It could be seen that there is a potential for harm if the student revisited what they said and did not like how they sounded. This leaves a researcher in somewhat of a dilemma about whether to follow-up such non-response. Had the respondent not 'got round' to replying or were they upset by the transcript? It was decided to err on the side of caution and not pursue the non-respondent to minimise the potential for harm.

The telephone interviews needed more structure and the researcher was able to note issues down while speaking to the community supervisors. Full information was gathered and the majority confirmed the transcripts that were sent to them.

The academic interviews went well, and the respondents gave full answers to the two questions. The checking of the issues raised at the end of each interview was useful to clarify the points made, but it would have been a further check of confirmability if the transcripts had also been sent to each one for checking. Because there was a three month delay between the gathering of data and the analysis, it was considered too long a delay to send out the transcripts. This does show the benefit, perhaps, of using a number of interviewers to gather information to reduce the length of time this process takes. It also shows the utility of using the data summary contact sheets which the interviewer completes immediately after each interview.

Discussion of results - the graduate interviews

The individual graduate results show the range of issues and concerns related to each individual of the first cohort of students who undertook a community nursing degree programme. They ranged in experience, attitude about the course and learning support needs, highlighting the need for an individualised approach to the support of each one.

While they all matched the 'instrumental' reason (Wagner 1990) or the 'vocational orientation' that was identified by Taylor et al (1981), there was a difference between their intrinsic or extrinsic reasons for enrolling on a course. Graduate 'C' in particular, exemplifies the external reasons for enrolling on the course, whereas, Graduates 'A', 'B', 'D' and 'F' displayed the intrinsic reasons further investigated in Strang's study (1987). Furthermore, Graduate 'C' displayed the 'negative vectors' as described by Gibson and Graf (1992) as this particular individual felt very isolated.

The graduates fitted Bernt and Bugbees' description (1993) of adult learners who had been out of the formal learning setting for some time. They seemed to have mixed views about university-level study. Graduate 'E' appeared to fit Smithers and Griffin's finding (1986) regarding the influence of hearsay on university study. This led to disillusionment for this particular individual and affected the 'effectiveness' of the course.

Three of the graduates lacked self-confidence at the start of the course and in keeping with Thyer and Bazeley's study (1993), felt pressurised by the course-work they were expected to complete.

As they progressed through the course, two of the respondents recognised the personal change that was occurring as found in Taylor's study (1985). This was exemplified by Graduate 'A' reporting that there was an increase in assertiveness and Graduate 'B' becoming more politically aware.

Two of the graduates reported feeling anxious about the lack of tutorial support during holiday periods. It is interesting to speculate whether they fitted into Brindley and Maxim's (1990) category of not really needing such support, or whether they were lacking in self-confidence. Unlike Hall et al's assertion (1993) that this shows student empowerment, it could be argued that this showed dependency on the course tutor.

As two of the graduates reported that one of the course team was intimidating, there appears to be agreement from the findings of the ability of a tutor to influence the learning experience as noted by Naylor and Cowie (1990) and Davies (1995). It may also be the case that staff development is needed to educate staff to develop the tutor qualities highlighted by Clarke et al (1986). In addition, the importance of support being obtained from fellow students has similarities to the findings of Pym (1992) and Kirkup and Von Prümmer (1990).

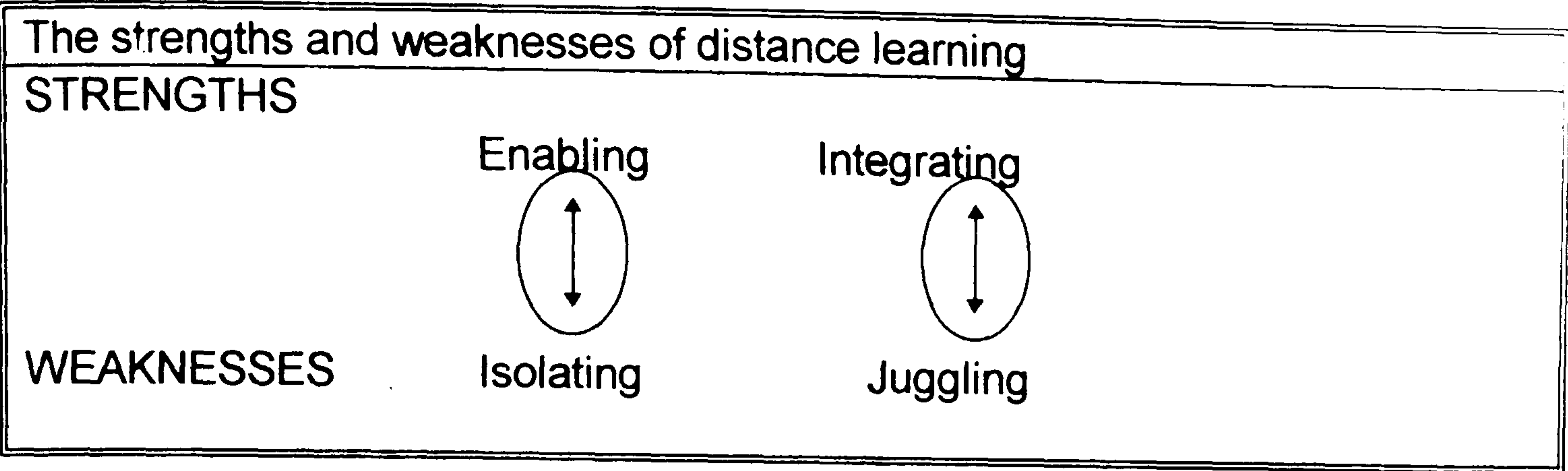
From the cross-case analysis, themes emerged from the data that showed the strengths and weaknesses of distance learning as a mode of course delivery.

The strengths that emerged were the ability to integrate theory with practice and the promotion of self-directed learning. These two strengths are fundamental to any programme of tertiary-level education. The fact that graduates were only away from their workplaces for a limited time enabled concepts to be linked to practice almost immediately after their presentation. The ability of the course to provide an integrated programme was mentioned by seven of the supervisors and three graduates. Within the analysis, the integration of the distance learning material was evidenced by the graduates who noted in the 'applying' cluster that they had collated material from the distance-learning packs which would be of particular use on a daily basis in the work-place.

The example of the development of self-directed learning was evidenced in the dissertation, where the student chose the topic for study themselves. The graduates found this the most useful part of the course. One explanation for this could be that they had several months in which to complete it, rather than the weeks allocated for the earlier work.

However, these strengths can be contrasted by the weaknesses of distance learning which were highlighted in the analysis. The following figure, 9.1, indicates how the strengths may be directly in opposition to the weaknesses with the enabling/isolating factors being in opposition to each other and the integrating/juggling factors in similar opposition.

Figure 9.1 The strengths and weaknesses of distance learning



The development of self-directed learning identified by the 'enabling' term reflected the realities of distance learning in that students were undertaking much of the course-work by themselves. For those students who may have lacked confidence or been unfamiliar with the distance learning approach, this emerged as a major weakness of distance learning. The factor identified as 'isolating', which highlighted the difficulties of undertaking this work was burdensome and stressful for some students. This notion of isolation was reported by four of the graduates and six of the community supervisors. Isolation was reported as being a negative factor in the study carried out by Gibson and Graf(1992) and by the study of distance learners undertaken by Cropley (1986).

Additionally, this shows that the transition for students who have been used to a more pedagogical approach of education or training may be difficult and is an area for student support. This finding suggests that students who are enrolling on a distance learning course need to be fully informed about its demands. This would lead to a realisation of the aims of distance learning and how the student will be supported in the development of self-directed learning.

The other major weakness was identified as 'juggling'. This, it is proposed, is in opposition to the strength of integration because the student is adding a course on to a busy life in contrast to a full-time course, where a student is away from the workplace for a set time of study. The 'work' part of a mature student's life may have been removed for the period of study. However, with a part-time or distance learning course, the student is only away from their normal life routine for a limited

period, but has to assume the role of student in addition to the other demands placed on them. Perhaps this was one of the reasons why two of the graduates would have preferred to undertake a full-time course.

When the student returned to their everyday life, the demands of accessing literature, completing the self-study material and working on the assignment, may have added additional stress to the demands of work and family life. A major factor in a flexible course design may help to support students who find that competing demands make course progression difficult. This notion of juggling was reported in the earlier survey where such concerns were identified in the 'time and organisational factors' category. However, it had also been reported as problematic by one of the full-time students, so it is possibly not a problem exclusive to distance learners, but indicative of the age and gender of the majority of the graduates.

The contact that students had with other students emerged as an important cluster in the data analysis and was also confirmed in the study carried out by Morgan and Morris (1994). This provided students with the opportunity to learn from each other, network information, share resources and socialise. The socialising process during the core weeks may be important for those students who are away from home or who may live in remote areas. In the earlier study, 'other students' had been influential in the support of fellow students. In addition, the graduates confirmed the importance of the support of other students. This is also supportive of the work reported earlier about the importance of face-to-face interaction and gender issues in the development of learning (Holmberg 1977, Dillon 1989, Kirkup and Von Prümmer 1990 and Pym 1992).

The ability and confidence to contact one another during the self-study phase of the course would be easier following the intensive nature of the required periods of university attendance ('core-week'), when students participated in a lot of group-work. One of the surprising clusters to emerge was the strength of friendships that were formed in a group of students who had only met each other for eight weeks spread over 18 months. This finding lends support to the additional benefits of the

core weeks. In addition, another advantage of the core weeks was the orientation that was given to those students who were new to the speciality.

In addition, self-help grew by means of student networking. As the data showed, students felt that a lot of support came from each other. In the earlier survey, 'other students' had been particularly influential in the support of fellow students. Two students noted that they were contacted by other students which became quite a hindrance at times. It would appear that the daily issues that full-time students discuss was taking place by telephone, rather than by face-to-face contact.

However, in view of the cluster about the reluctance to contact tutors, it is not surprising that students contacted each other. What is not clear from the data is whether the student had tried in vain to contact a tutor or if it was a lack of self-confidence. The reluctance to contact tutors was found in the study carried out by Burge, Howard and Ironside (1991). The lack of self-confidence which may prevent a student approaching a tutor for help was also noted by Beaty and Morgan (1992) and Taylor (1985).

The past experience of the relationship a graduate had with any previous teachers may be influential here and one or two of the graduates mentioned the approachability of the tutorial staff in comparison to their previous experience of nurse teachers. This finding confirms the work of Rogers 1989 and McGivney (1993). It is interesting to speculate why a student may feel 'stupid' if a member of staff is approached, particularly at the beginning of a course, when they may have the most difficulty adjusting to the new course. Furthermore, it is hard to ascertain what happens to give the student the confidence to phone. Perhaps the core week individual meeting between student and tutor may enable this relationship to develop. The gradual development of a working relationship emerged, with the knowledge that someone 'was there' being seen as the important factor. This finding confirmed the results of the earlier survey.

However, four of the graduates wondered about the amount of information that was received from tutors which related to completed academic work and queried the

value of the feedback. The feedback from previous assignment work was interpreted by the content, rather than from the potential to develop their writing skills. This supports the findings of Naylor and Cowie (1990) about the uncertainty some students have about the purpose of feedback.

The role of a mentor in distance education was not seen as being fundamental to the effectiveness of the course. Such a mentor would have to have knowledge of distance learning and be able to discuss ideas and thoughts. One graduate worried that the mentor would adopt too much of a teaching role, with another graduate noting that they would not contact someone that they did not know. In contrast, for the graduate who felt very isolated, access to a local mentor would have been very helpful. Perhaps it is a system that should be student-directed, rather than organised from the department. In addition, being the first group of students to undertake the course may have meant that they felt more isolated than subsequent student cohorts do, as there were no people available locally to offer such a mentorship role.

The information gathered in the evaluation forms in the graduate biography section indicated that graduates identified that they carried out at least 50% of the distance learning material. However, it is realised that there is no way of testing whether the graduates did carry out this amount of work. In view of the pressure of time for these students, it is not surprising that they were unable to complete the whole of the module work. They had been undertaking two eighty hour modules per term in year one, and completing the summative assignments. An approximate estimate would be twenty study hours per week which is more than some full-time courses. When this is added to carrying on their full-time work and home-life, it is little wonder that their course-work became assignment-driven. However, from the 'seeking' cluster highlighted in the analysis, it could be argued that meta-cognitive skills were being employed to seek out relevant information. In addition, frustration was noted by those graduates who felt that distance learning was seen as being of 'less value' than a full-time course. This concern that distance learning is an easy option is not confirmed in the current study. The student who mentioned this said

that they were working harder than students undertaking full-time courses. The distance-learning material was used primarily to direct the reading required for the assignments.

The frustration of fast-tracking was noted as being a cause of stress for the graduates. The main reason was the lack of time for undertaking further reading round a topic, and the fatigue of keeping up such an intense period of study throughout the academic year. This finding highlights the importance of ensuring that a potential 'fast-tracker' understands the demands of such an approach to studying by appropriate counselling and advice on enrolment. In addition, more information is needed for the nurse managers who are seconding students as it appeared that there was no reduction in the workload of the distance-learning students.

As shown in the cluster table, and from the comments made in the evaluation forms, there was a mixed reaction to the period of assessed practice. Comments made by the community supervisors add to the process of data triangulation. There did seem to be a difficulty in the assessment of nurses who had been practising in the speciality for some time. This was highlighted by three of the graduates. It suggests that an individual programme of clinical experience needs to be planned to allow development to occur. Where this had happened with graduate 'F', it proved to be a valuable experience. The knowledge and support offered by the community supervisors seemed to be influential for at least three of the graduates (A, D and F) with the ability to link the theory to practice being seen as particularly important. One of the patterns to emerge in the community supervisor data was the integration of theory to practice by five of the supervisors. This was of mutual benefit to both the student and the supervisor. This suggests that the community supervisor would have to be well-informed about the nature of the theoretical component of the course as well as distance learning. This could explain the need that was expressed by one graduate about improved communication between the Department and the supervisors. The comments raised by the community supervisors also recognised the difficulties of assessing clinical skills with one

supervisor commenting on the inadequacy of the assessment form. This was also mentioned by one of the graduates.

The suitability of placements, the knowledge about the course as well as the student and an improvement of the links between the supervisors and the Department were the main ways that improvement could be made to link theory to the practice element of the course.

The clusters which emerged in the section of the analysis relating to the main experiences were similar to the findings from the earlier survey, and the literature on adult learning needs. The anxiety that students felt at the start of the course about their ability, previous experiences, writing skills and age are in keeping with these earlier findings (Rogers 1989, Marnell and Blanche 1990, Valcke et al 1991 and Thyer and Bazeley 1993). This seems to reinforce the need to make an early assessment of the learning needs of students so that they are aware that the academic staff will be able to offer them support until they get to know fellow students as noted by Earwaker (1992). The worry about writing skills was also shown to be a finding of the mature students studied by Smithers and Griffin (1986) and Wankowski (1991).

The ending of the course caused some students difficulty as they found that they felt lost - one graduate reported that they did not want to leave. This demonstrates that the tutor has to be aware of the need to bring the relationship to a proper close. The ability to follow a student through from the beginning to the end of a course will be a learning experience for both of them, especially if there is progress. Holmberg's (1993) comments about the friendships that can develop seem of great relevance here. It is not only the student-tutor relationship that comes to an end, but also the disbanding of a student group, with the resulting loss of comradeship.

Being the first cohort of students, there were teething problems, which raised quality issues in the minds of the graduates. Five of the graduates made allowances for the fact that they were the pioneering group and it is questioned

whether the strengths of the friendships made had any bearing on this. The final graduate felt that too many allowances were made for mistakes by the course team.

The quality issues that were raised included issues such as:

- the delivery of some of the classes in one of the core weeks
- the availability of library books and journals
- the type of assignments that were given

These problems indicate the need to have team guidelines to ensure there is equity in the advice and organisation of the course. It also confirms the need for educational planning and researching and is consistent with Brown's view (1993) that there is a mis-placed focus on cost-savings without addressing the effect on students. One core-week disaster which so many of the graduates mentioned was a direct example of this. Not only were the students combined with another course which caused bad feeling, but the environment for the core teaching was totally unsuitable. It shows that all the support in the world will not compensate for a course of poor quality.

With respect to the library provision, the finding in this study highlights the need for students to have guidance on the skills needed to search the literature early on in the course. A relevant finding in this study was the enjoyment that the students had undertaking their individual projects. This shows the ability that they had developed by the second year in literature searching and reviewing and the benefits of undertaking a chosen, rather than assigned piece of work.

Additionally, as they were the first group of students to undertake the programme, some of the graduates felt that their sense of isolation during the self-study phase was heightened as there was no-one to turn to.

Of the negative aspects of the course, the amount of work that the students were expected to complete being 'fast-trackers' was almost overwhelming for some of the students. This raises the issue of whether such an option should be available

through a part-time course or ensuring that students are fully informed about the implications of 'fast-tracking'. This would recognise the learning needs of the students rather than organising a course that is completed in the minimum time. The need for students to be treated with respect was also raised within the negative aspects of the course. A framework of supportive learning that encompassed a student-centred approach to learning would help to address this issue as the student's individual needs could be attended to .

From the nervousness and uncertainty at the beginning of the course through the demands of the coursework, there was an emphasis on finishing the course. One graduate felt that the course had not been the challenging experience that had been hoped for, although perhaps this was due to the unrealistic impression about higher education. The relief at the successful completion that was felt by the very stressed graduate was also noted. Throughout the length of the studies, there appears to be a development of a working relationship between the students and tutors, with the community supervisor being influential in the assessment of clinical practice. The graduate results confirm the notions of 'effectiveness' as interpreted by students as shown in the first chapter.

Discussion of results - the community supervisors

The findings of the community supervisor interviews suggests that the role of the community supervisor is enjoyable, if somewhat demanding. It was seen as an opportunity to link theory to practice. There were two broad views within the group interviewed, with one group finding it to be a difficult role. The other group found it more enabling. This difference did not reflect the amount of formal education that the individual had undertaken to fulfill the supervisory role. The area of difficulty involved the assessment of an individual's clinical skills which had been mentioned by the graduates as well.

The seven community supervisors who had been allocated both full-time and distance learners had not noticed any major difference between the two groups, but rather there was a realisation of the demands of being a mature student.

The positive element of the preparation of the supervisors was the ability to meet other people and to gain a working knowledge of the course. This was seen as another way to help the student link theory to practice.

The qualities that the community supervisors identified as being important were similar to those needed by academic staff in distance learning settings (Gibbs and Durbridge 1976, Clarke et al 1986, Naylor and Cowie 1990). The qualities included being knowledgeable, having skill in interpersonal communication and being enthusiastic.

The community supervisors had both positive and negative feelings about distance education itself. The positive features included the ability to enable wider access to education, the flexibility of distance education and the ability to apply theory to practice. However, this was countered by the potential for isolation for the distance-learning student, both from the academic environment and other students. This is a similar finding to Thompson's study (1990) when students also noted that distance learning would mean such a disconnection with the academic environment. However, a supportive learning framework should prevent this from happening. In addition, it was felt that much organisation had to go into combining multiple roles in order to cope with the demands of studying, working and home-life. Two of the supervisors mentioned the need for distance learners to have high motivational levels which was seen as a negative aspect of distance learning.

The links between theory and practice should be maintained by regular links between the University Department and the practice setting; an ongoing awareness of the content; and keeping in contact with other supervisors. The final issue that should improve the relationship between the University and practice was the need to have a relevant assessment form. There is the possibility for collaborative practice for such development.

Discussion of results - the academic colleagues

Differences were noted in the types of issues that were deemed to influence the effectiveness of the course, depending on the involvement of a particular tutor. It was noted that none of the external tutors were assessed as finding the course effective. However, in contrast, the internal tutors, who had more knowledge of the whole course, were assessed as seeing the course as being effective, in parts. This could be seen as how 'close' a particular tutor was to the material as noted by Thorpe (1989).

The one area where there was agreement among all the tutors was in the 'quality issues' theme. There seemed to be the potential for effectiveness which was hampered by a perceived lack of time for development and review. Within the 'learning opportunities' theme, all tutors mentioned the influence of a student's previous knowledge and educational experience. Five of the tutors noted the different approach that was needed when working with distance learners. Two of the internal tutors commented on the need for staff development to address this change of role, which supports Dillon et al (1989) who wrote about the need for specific staff development in order to work with distance learners.

All tutors mentioned the distance learning material itself, with the potential for effectiveness being noted. However, there seemed to be a current sense of dissatisfaction with it, with two tutors noting the lack of time for developing new material. This was highlighted earlier by Collet et al (1987), Burge and Lenskyj(1990). This is also raised within the 'quality issues' theme.

The role of the tutor is addressed through the relationship that may develop with a student which was written about in an earlier chapter. This role was noted by four of the internal tutors. Due to the fact that the external tutors were only involved with one module, the chance for a relationship to develop with the student did not occur. The trust that needed to develop was highlighted as was the potential for isolation of the distance learner. The importance of the core weeks was identified by four of

the tutors as well which would enhance the relationship with the tutor, although the core week was seen as being problematic by the three external tutors.

The internal tutors also focused on the clinical placement issues. The external tutors had no involvement with this part of the course. The distance-learning format was seen as a way of integrating theory to practice. However, it was seen as being a problematic area due to the lack of understanding of the clinical supervisors. The possible involvement of a local mentor in such distance-learning courses was not a way to ensure more support for the student as in the experience of two of the tutors, there was often role confusion within the mentor.

The learning opportunities would include the ability for distance learning to allow for the integration of theory to practice as well as offering an education that would develop writing and transferable skills. Distance learning provided a means to education for those students unable to access full-time higher education. Within the structure of the particular course being studied, learning opportunities could present themselves more effectively during the core weeks and the clinical placement. In addition, the distance-learning material had room for improvement.

The role of the tutor in distance education was seen as being different from that of a tutor in full-time higher education as noted by Granger (1989). There was the ability to develop a working relationship, although the amount of time spent out of the department meant that this could be difficult. The contactability of tutors through the telephone tutorial system was noted, but proved difficult for one or two of the tutors who were not linked to the Department on a full-time basis.

The final category related to the 'quality issues', whether that was in quality control, which would determine academic progression and prevent the degree being devalued; the quality of the material which would include the amount of time available for development and review of the material; and the resourcing of the library.

As can be seen, five of the tutors identified particular aspects related to the resourcing of the course, whether it was:-

- the time available for development of material
- review of existing material
- the availability of books and journals in the library
- the need for staff development which could focus on the adaptation required to be a tutor on a distance-learning programme
- the complex administrative needs of such courses.

The second theme was concerned about the amount of information that a student had about distance learning at the start of their course. This notion of information would enable students to have a more realistic notion of the demands and nature of distance learning. Two of the external tutors suggested that the written assignment work could be more applicable to practice, and that there should be more consistency in the guidelines given to students about their writing. The promotion of networking with other students and tutors was mentioned by one of the internal tutors.

The final theme related to issues of quality. Two tutors noted the impact on the quality of the course if student numbers were not attended to. The format and style of the distance-learning material as well as the quality of it needed to be addressed according to two of the internal tutors. Another two tutors, one internal and the other external felt that the course would be more effective if the core weeks were moved away from the introduction to the module. The final part of this theme related to academic standards and the need to consider them within the course and as a potential area of backlash from the profession if quality was not maintained within the course.

Summary

Overall, these results have shown what it was like to be a distance-learner, a community supervisor or an academic working in a distance learning course. It has shown that the six graduates worked very hard to complete their course, and developed coping strategies throughout their experience. It is proposed that the use of a supportive model of learning would have added to this experience by giving the course tutor a framework for guidance. The community supervisors found their role challenging. The final chapter compares the results of the two stages of the research project.

CHAPTER TEN: A DISCUSSION OF THE OVERALL FINDINGS AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS FOR THE PROVISION OF EFFECTIVE DISTANCE LEARNING IN COMMUNITY NURSE EDUCATION

Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to draw together the similarities that emerged from the survey and the three sets of interviews that were carried out with the graduates, the community supervisors and the academic colleagues. It is shown that similar issues were mentioned by the respondents in both stages of the research. This research adds to the understanding of the meaning of the experience of being a distance learner as well as raising the main issues relating to the effectiveness of the education of community nurses by distance learning. The issues raised in this chapter will enable the model of supportive learning to be revisited and refined based on these findings. Initially, it is proposed to address whether the overall aims of the research project have been achieved.

The aims of the research project

There were six aims outlined at the beginning of the research project. One of the difficulties in setting out aims at the beginning of a long-term project is the potential for a lack of flexibility in following-up issues that arise from the literature and research findings. Although this was not a problem with the first two aims (which intended to identify educational and support needs as well as develop an evaluation strategy for a distance learning course), it became more challenging in the second stage.

In retrospect, while there was an opportunity to examine a mode of course delivery and the educational aids that may assist the distance learner, the use of the term 'mentor' needs to be re-examined. Mentorship, in this context, is interpreted as the meeting of the support needs that a distance learner has, and in respect of the research aims, the term intends to fulfil the meaning of the

term 'educational aid'. This may have a variety of possible interpretations and as Merriam noted (1983), it might be a difficult term to define. In a way, this is useful because it makes it a flexible role that may be undertaken by different people at varying points throughout a course. It will be shown in this section that there are similar qualities needed in a 'mentor', no matter what other role they hold. The qualities needed by a person fulfilling a 'mentoring' role within a distance learning course and their educational needs are discussed in the following section. Overall, it is contended that the aims of the research project have been achieved through the literature review and findings of the two stages of the research project.

The role and qualities of a mentor

As community nurse distance education in this research setting incorporates the three elements of core residential module weeks, the self-study phase and the clinical practice, it is suggested that different people could adopt the mentoring role within a framework of supportive learning. This would reflect the notion that the distance-learning student need not be isolated. It also shows the result of the survey which indicated that students may feel comfortable in obtaining support from several people. The advantage would be the continuation of support within each phase of the educational programme. However, it is also acknowledged that such a system should not be enforced upon a student, but be student-led. This could work as shown in the following figure, 10.1.

Figure 10.1 Possible mentor roles during the three phases of a distance learning course

<u>Phase of Course</u>	<u>Potential 'Mentor'</u>
Core residential week	Personal tutor
Self-study phase	'Other'/Personal tutor
Clinical component	Community Supervisor

Within this three-phase programme, the term 'other' may incorporate other students, colleagues, employers or family. As shown in the findings of the survey and graduate interviews, students obtain much support from each other. The qualities needed by any person undertaking the role of mentor were identified by the community supervisors under the 'professional' and 'personal' categories. Such qualities encompassed the need for knowledge, tolerance, patience, 'fairness', being open and committed to the teaching role. In addition, these same qualities were recognised as being important in teachers (Eason and Corbett 1991) and in distance-learning tutors (Clarke et al 1986; Burge et al 1991). However, it may be useful to consider the potential advantages and disadvantages of the people identified above acting as 'mentors'.

The course tutor was identified as a major source of support by the respondents in the survey. In addition, Akinsanya (1992) noted the crucial role of the tutor and the graduates identified a range of supportive roles that the tutor may undertake. Bamford and Rose (1992) and Jarvis (1992) discussed the ability of the tutor to link theory to practice. However, Merriam (1983) asserted that the difference in level between a student and a tutor would hinder such a mentoring role. This would be due to the mixed supportive and assessment role. However, the findings of the interviews with the six graduates would suggest that it was possible to combine such roles within a student-centred philosophy, disagreeing with Merriam (1983).

The advantage of having the tutor in a mentoring role would be the ability for the continuation of support throughout a programme and the development of a working relationship between the student and the tutor.

In respect of the role of the 'other' in figure 10.1, the potential for a previous student to act in a mentoring role was suggested by some of the respondents in the survey as well as by one of the graduates. The advantage of this would be the familiarity with the difficulties faced by adult students as they would have

'been through it', and, therefore, would be able to empathise with the student. As the graduate noted, it would be a 'buddy' role for the isolated student. It would also be an opportunity to obtain support from an individual who was not in an assessing role. This was advocated by Lyons (1991), Mills (1991) and Anforth (1992).

However, a disadvantage would be the potential for mis-information to occur if elements of a course had changed. In addition, a student may be reluctant to contact an unknown person.

The community supervisor is in an ideal position to link theory to practice (Bamford and Rose 1992, Jarvis 1992,) during the clinical component of the course. Despite the mixed role of assessment and support, the student would have the opportunity to spend time with an experienced practitioner in a clinical area. The disadvantage could be the lack of current knowledge about the course that the student was undertaking. As some of the academics noted, there may be a practice-theory knowledge gap and in addition, the community supervisors recognised the need to keep close links with the academic staff.

As has already been mentioned, the qualities needed for any of the people identified as possible mentors appear to be similar. This suggests that the educational preparation should be similar for the tutoring staff and community supervisors. It is recognised that it may be difficult to access all the people that would fit into the 'other' category. It is proposed that the needed educational preparation could be developed by using the component parts of the supportive model of learning as the basis of the curriculum. This would enable the mentor to develop knowledge in:-

- the characteristics of adult learners
- the qualities needed by the tutor
- the content of the course
- the underpinning student-centred relationship between the student and tutor

(or community supervisor)

- the determination of whether an effective learning experience has been achieved.

It is argued that such an educational programme would enhance the preparation of community nurses within a distance learning programme. There would also be the inclusion of the following seven topics which show the similarities of the findings of the two stages of research in the project.

The strengths and weaknesses of distance learning

The isolation of distance learning was noted by the students and the community supervisors as being a negative aspect although it was noted that it also enabled the widening of access to education. This was mentioned by a community supervisor and three tutors. This was seen as being an important consideration for those students unable to gain access to full-time education.

The 'juggling' that a student has to undertake in order to study by distance-learning was noted by the diploma-level students in the survey as well as being reinforced by the students and three of the community supervisors.

The strength of distance learning being able to foster transferable skills was identified by the students and the community supervisors. This was also noted by the Scottish Office (1994) who noted that the development of self-directed skills would enhance the development of such transferable skills. In addition, one of the community supervisors indicated that self-direction is an important skill for the community nurse to develop as they were working in isolation for much of the time. One of the tutors also identified this strength, whereas one of the external tutors did not see any development of these skills. In addition, the opportunity to integrate theory to practice was recognised by three students, four community supervisors and the initial survey of distance learners. This reinforces the notion of the dilemma of distance learning enabling more

students to undertake higher education but demonstrating that this has a negative implication too, as such students may have limited time available for studying. The implications for the course team seem to be in the guidance and support that they can offer students.

Practice component

Students did not identify that community supervisors lacked knowledge about the course although one of the internal tutors said that they did not always keep up to date. Only one student identified the difficulty in the assessment phase of the course. Overall, both the students and community supervisors found this part of the course enjoyable. However, the issue of assessing an experienced practitioner's clinical skills was seen as being difficult by some of the community supervisors. The community supervisors and internal tutors recognised the need for close links between the university and the placement. This would enhance the effectiveness of the course as the community supervisors would feel informed about the course as well as developing strong links with the Department.

The required periods of university attendance

The required periods of attendance at the University (core weeks) were seen as an important way to build up the relationship between the student and tutor by the internal tutors and the students. The external tutors who, perhaps, were unsure of the purpose of the core weeks did not see their value. The aim of the core weeks is to promote networking, to enable students to learn from each other and to spend individual time with the personal tutor. This shows the integration that could be achieved with the community supervisor if they were invited to presentations in the core week. However, this would pose a dilemma for those supervisors at a distance as it would be difficult for them to travel to the Department. Close links could be made while the student is on a placement by way of personal visits or the use of the video-conferencing facility. The contacts made on a face-to-face basis may develop these links, adding to the

'connectedness' for the student. The core weeks enabled students to continue to get support from each other during the self-study phase, as noted by the students themselves and the tutors. Core weeks could be used to facilitate the development of transferable skills identified as internal concerns in the discussion section of the survey.

Adult learners

The difficult transition for students into higher education settings was noted in the survey in the categories highlighted by both full-time and distance learners. Issues such as age, expectations, academic writing and degree-level education were noted. The graduates also referred to these issues, confirming these findings. However, these issues were seen as problematic by five of the tutors as they thought students had unrealistic expectations of higher education due to the limitations of their previous education. The building on this experience to ease the adaptation process was not seen by the external tutors. However, it was noted by the students in the survey that such building on knowledge would have helped their learning. A model of supportive learning that addressed such issues would enable external tutors to become familiar with the needs of adult students, both in a full-time and distance-learning setting. It would also enable support to be offered from the time of enrolment to the completion of the course.

The Tutor

The individualised nature of the support for students was recognised by the internal tutors and the graduates, although both were aware of the time that was needed to build a trusting relationship. This relationship allowed individual needs to be met. The benefits of the amount and nature of written feedback was not always made clear to students, although it was seen as a strength by one of the tutors. The results confirm that staff may need additional preparation to work within a distance-learning course. This would enable student support to be offered within a facilitative structure.

The adaptation for the student was noted when it was highlighted that students might be reluctant to contact tutors. Additionally, the qualities that the community supervisor identified as being important were relevant to the role of the tutor, namely: being interested, having the ability to listen, being knowledgeable, being able to give constructive criticism and being kind.

The potential for the role of the mentor was mentioned by the community supervisors and internal tutors. However, it was not always seen as being positive. One tutor felt a mentor may serve to confuse the student (a view also shared by one student). However, another tutor and one of the community supervisors saw it as a potential role for them which would address the lack of another student who would not want to contact an unknown person. However, this would not address the joint responsibility of the community supervisor who has an assessment role as well as a supportive one. Nonetheless, students in the survey and two graduates reported that they would have benefited from a local mentor.

Resources

Library provision was mentioned by the students in the survey, the graduates and the internal tutors. This seems to pose a dilemma in the balancing of provision of texts and journals and the need to develop transferable skills in information-seeking. Two students did mention that their library skills had improved when they were undertaking the dissertation. The reasons for this could be two-fold. By the second stage of the course, the students were more familiar with the ways of accessing literature and they were focusing on one project, having more time to work on it than in the first year. Perhaps more guidance could be given on how to locate material as part of the orientation phase of the course. The collaboration that has developed between the course team and librarians had enabled strategies such as a postal-loan scheme to be made widely available to the distance learners. However, the difficulties in

resourcing distance learning courses which was mentioned by Shears (1992) and Unwin (1994) have been confirmed in the findings of this study. It also confirms Tucker's assertion (1993) that distance learners are 'real' students. This suggests the need for course teams to present resource issues at an Institutional level to improve the learning climate for students.

Quality issues

The preparation for the distance-learning tutor's role was mentioned by the academic staff as being lacking. This is similar to the finding of Dillon et al (1992) and Simpson (1992). In addition there was a need expressed by the community supervisors to be familiarised with the new course. The need for standardisation across the specialities was noted by one community supervisor to ensure the standard of the course. The academic standard was mentioned by the internal and external tutors, with regard to the developmental time and the quality of the packs. The students were uncritical of the material, however, and they restructured them to use as a reference pack. This was also noted as a strength of distance learning material by Shipway (1995).

The speed with which these students progressed through the course affected the quality of their learning experience. One tutor and the graduates noted that the demands placed on the students was not recognised by local managers. This would suggest that fast-tracking has to be clearly explained to potential students before they start the course so that an informed choice about its demands can be made. Students need to be orientated to a distance-learning course mode in order to develop their learning skills. This would allow importance to be placed on the process of learning, as well as the outcome.

The model of supportive learning

These seven issues show the similarities in the results of the survey and interviews with the six graduates, seven academic colleagues and nine community supervisors. They lend support to the development of the model of supportive learning as a means of orientating students, community supervisors and academic colleagues to the distance-learning mode of course delivery. The model of supportive learning will now be revisited in order to refine it on the basis of the results.

In relation to the structure of the model of supportive learning, there is similarity to the four educational metaparadigm identified in Chapter four, adding confirmation to these categories. This is shown in the following figure, 10.2.

Figure 10.2 The comparison between the educational metaparadigms and the research findings

EDUCATIONAL META-PARADIGM	RESEARCH FINDINGS
Student	Adult Learner
Tutor	Tutor
Environment	Self-study; Clinical practice; Residential weeks
Course	Resources ;Quality Issues

The comparison shows that the 'environment' would encompass the learning environment for both the theoretical and practical components of the course. The 'resource' and 'quality' issues would fit into the 'course' category.

In relation to the propositions that were made about the model of supportive learning, the support and encouragement given to students was noted as was the sense of trust that developed during the course. This would add confirmability to the second proposition which stated that the tutor enabled the links to be made between the four metaparadigm. The contrast between the

comments made about the unhelpfulness of the tutorial system in the survey is in opposition to this.

From the results obtained in the research, the philosophy of the supportive model would remain the same. The results of the graduate interviews would lend support to the developmental nature of the model, particularly in the 'getting help' and 'finishing the course' categories. In addition, the three phases would stay the same, with the proviso that the pre-course information is improved (especially for students considering a fast-tracking option).

The final comparison is with the structure of the variables in the model itself. The importance of the student-tutor relationship remains central to the model, providing that the tutor is well-prepared for the role. The graduates valued the advice about the requirements of the course and the feelings of confidence that the tutor could promote in the students. In addition, this process is seen as developing throughout the course.

The student characteristics variable needs to reflect the support that students give each other and the importance of networking, both through meeting in the core week and during the self-study phase. It is suggested that this is added as an additional variable in the model. This shows that distance learning in this approach need not be isolating.

To show the closeness and two way nature of each of the variables, it is now proposed that each variable should overlap the main student-tutor relationship variable. The student characteristic variable would still recognise the need to build on previous knowledge and experience as well as addressing the apprehension that a student may well feel at the beginning of the course.

The tutor variable would remain the same, being confirmed by the results of the data gathered through the survey and the interviews.

The course content variable needs to be expanded to address the resourcing and quality issues expressed by the graduates and the academic tutors. The feedback that could be obtained from the theoretical and practical components would enable the ongoing development of the course content to occur. In addition, this variable shows the usefulness of the individualised dissertation in the final part of the course.

The need for the course progression variable is now questioned as all components are present in the student-tutor relationship variable. Thus, the revised version of the model of supportive learning would look as shown in figure 10.3, below. It will be noted that this model is still a path model. Consideration was given to whether "effective learning" should surround the five variables to show its importance and how it underpins the model. On reflection, it was decided that this model was developmental with the three phases of 'meeting', 'guiding' and 'moving on' now being added to show this. To obtain an effective learning experience, it is suggested that these five variables have to be in place. In addition, it is proposed that this model has applicability, both in the theoretical and practical components of the course. In the latter instance, it could provide a framework for use by the community supervisors, both for orientation and on-going preparation.

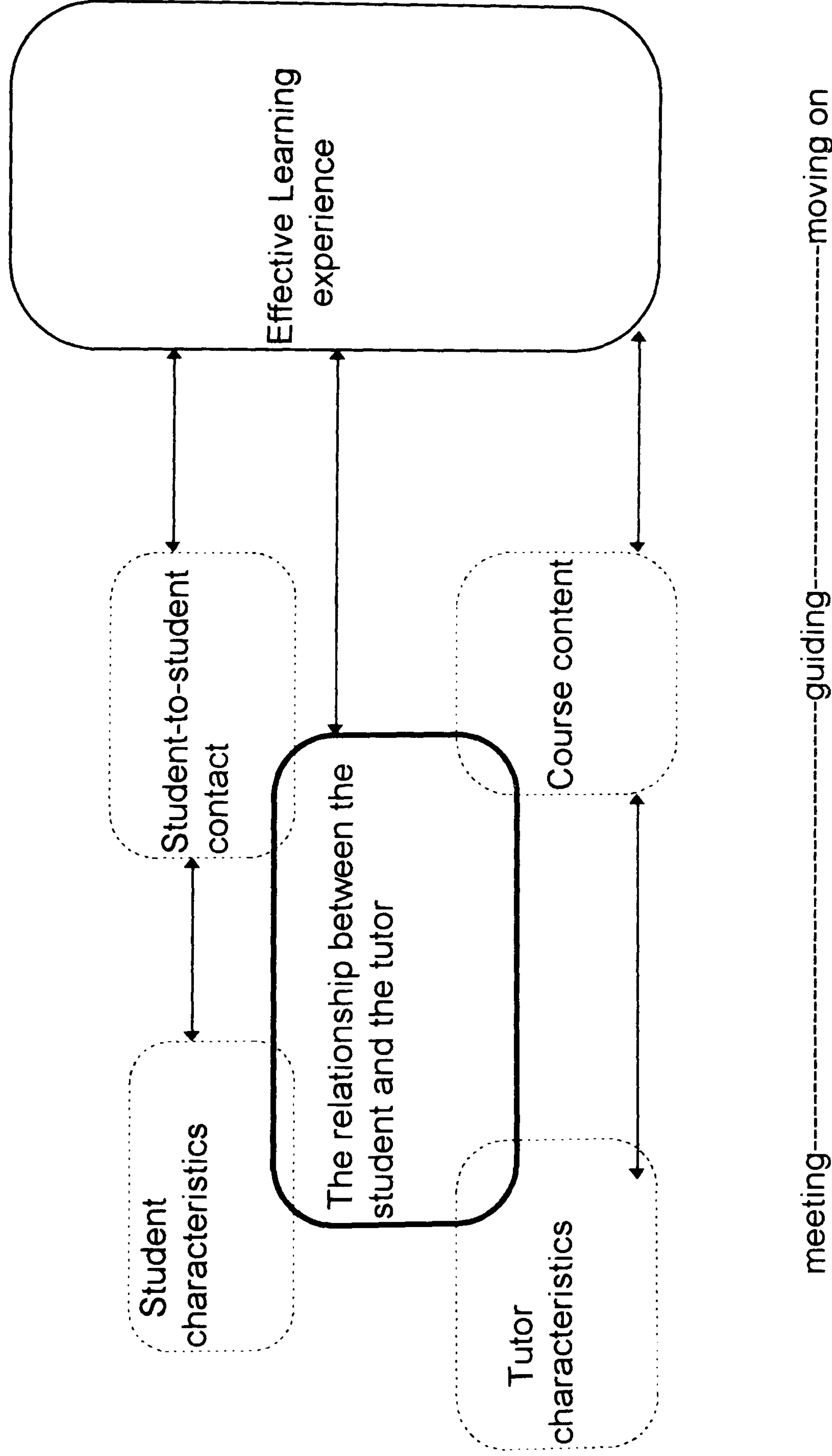


Figure 10.3 The revised model of supportive learning

The evaluation of the proposed system of mentorship and a distance-learning course

As Bevis noted (1989) students should form an integral part of any evaluation process of both the course, the tutor and course supervisor. Such an evaluative system would encourage the involvement of the students in the process of their education, building on Roger's (1978) notion of genuineness and acceptance of the student's views. This, it is argued, should enhance the effectiveness of the learning experience.

Holzemer (1992) defines the process of evaluation as being both a descriptive and judgemental activity undertaken to either measure the effectiveness of an educational programme, as in this instance, or improve a course. It is suggested that such a process may enhance the learning and teaching (Pech and Wallace 1993) as it enables staff to respond to positive and negative criticism.

Evaluation strategies may focus on the formative process of education or on the outcomes. This process may be difficult in adult education settings where there is attention paid to the development of transferable skills. Ruddock (1989) has questioned the ability of a course team to undertake such evaluation. As with the variety of definitions of effectiveness that were identified in the first chapter, the definition of the term evaluation may mean different things to an institution, tutors and students. The institution may be interested in student outcomes due to the current interest in performance indicators. Such data gathered includes biographical data about enquirers, enrolled students, progress and completion rates. The purpose of this is to match resources to student numbers and course viability. The course team also have an interest in the biographical data, but possibly with more interest on identifying the geographical distribution of students; subject areas where courses are over or under subscribed as well as having an interest in evaluating the progress and support of students. The course team will also be concerned with the

effectiveness of the programme in meeting the needs of both students and employers.

The student population may be interested in the summaries of the biographical data to examine the number of students on the programme and how many have successfully completed the course. In addition, such information would enable them to see the availability of student support. This notion of a multiple audience for such evaluation has been commented on by Kovel-Jarvøe (1987). This does suggest that those involved in the evaluation of a programme need to have a clear rationale for the purposes of the evaluation.

In addition, Calder (1994) notes the varying interpretations of the terms 'formative' and 'summative' evaluation, depending on the particular educational setting. Calder (1994) identifies 'formative' evaluation as the strategies used to improve the educational provision as well as being used to monitor the progress of course material. Examples of formative evaluation within distance learning would include the piloting of distance-learning material or promoting peer review for new material. It could also entail the revising and replacing of material on a regular basis.

In developing an evaluative framework, Bevis (1989) asserts that using evaluation within the teaching-learning strategy enables students to develop their critical skills without any punitive result. She developed a model called the connoisseurship model which encompassed this approach.

Summative evaluation, according to Calder (1994) takes a broader view aiming to judge the effectiveness of an educational programme against pre-determined criteria. Kember (1989) uses the distance-learning model he developed in such a way and this lends support to the development of a supportive model of learning for a similar purpose.

Although Kember (1989) argues that there has been little evaluation in distance education, Ruddock (1989) disagrees with this view arguing that distance education evaluation was established in the 1960s. This has been undertaken to demonstrate its effectiveness against the more traditional approaches. Benson et al (1991) note that it is important to decide who the most appropriate evaluator should be as this would influence both the reason why the evaluation is being undertaken as well as the approach that may be used. McLeod (1995) notes that there has to be a link between the course philosophy and the method used to evaluate it. McLeod used a phenomenological approach to assess the effectiveness of an undergraduate nursing programme. Strategies adopted included field-notes, audio-recorded interviews, similar to the approach used in the second phase of the research project undertaken.

Rutman (1984) describes two extremes of the evaluation process in education. They are, on the one hand **subjective evaluation** and on the other, **objective evaluation**. An example of objective evaluation in the case of distance education would be the number of students completing a course successfully, or the number of students dropping out of a programme of study. However, this approach to evaluation does not inform the reader what that educational experience is like. This would be where subjective evaluation would be useful as it would provide such information about the experience that a student had on a course. Calder (1994) calls this **illuminative** evaluation and recognises the broad approach that may be taken within evaluative strategies. Rutman (1984:57) states, '*an emergent consensus in evaluation, however, seems to be moving towards a position where both qualitative and quantitative data are valued and recognised as legitimate*', which reinforces this position. Benson (1993) proposes that a qualitative approach is more appropriate in distance education, providing the data are gathered systematically to ensure reliability and validity. This should be the case no matter which approach is employed. Consideration should also be given to the strategies used in evaluation so that no student was dis-advantaged. It would appear that to obtain the broadest

range of feedback, a systematic approach should be used. Polit and Hungler (1995) discuss the four-step approach to evaluation in research as the setting of objectives, the plan developed for their implementation, followed by the data collection and review stages. This systematic approach is similar to the nursing process and should be an ongoing process measuring the effectiveness of the course from both the tutor and student perspectives.

Lentell (1995) asserts the use of action-research to evaluate courses. This is an attractive recommendation as it would involve the team in this vital part of the work of the course. Taylor (1994) suggests that a move towards a team approach to evaluation would assist the development of the course and team-members. Action research is a way of practitioners, in this case the course team, undertaking research on their own practice. This distinguishes it from other approaches. Kemmis (1988:42) argues that it can be used to, *'improve the rationality and justice of their own social or educational practices, the understanding of these practices and the situations in which the practices are carried out'*.

Action research is undertaken cyclically with planning, acting, observing and reflecting phases. If such an approach was to be used, there would be a need for those involved in a course to work collaboratively. This approach is similar to the 8-phase evaluative process described by Diflorio et al (1989). This model has the acronym 'PAIREDAR' and is undertaken in three phases.

Phase one relates to the first three stages in that the purpose of the evaluation is noted along with the intended audience and the issues that are to be addressed. This would occur before the implementation of the data-gathering process and would ensure that the potential for harm is lessened as only specific data would be sought. The second phase of this model addresses the data-gathering phase when the resources required for the evaluation process are identified along with the type of evidence that is to be collected. The third

and final phase is concerned with the possible ways of analysing and reporting the results of the evaluation. Again, the need for respect for the content of the gathered data would have to be agreed among the evaluators. Overall, the 'pairedar' model illustrates the process that has to be in place to enable the evaluation to take place. The proposed evaluation strategy is shown in Appendix VIII.

Contributions to the term 'effectiveness' from stages one and two of the research project

The final issue to consider is how the various respondents viewed the notion of 'effectiveness' within this research project. The respondents in the survey were asked how their learning could have been enhanced, which is similar to the concept of 'effectiveness' meaning **the usefulness of the course to the student**. Three main categories focused on the organisation of the course, the quality of teaching and personal factors, which acknowledge the demands of being a mature student. Effectiveness was linked to a range of 'quality issues' which included the development of the opportunities for learning and support for the students, the preparation for the role of the distance-learning tutor as well as the importance of addressing resourcing issues.

Based on the findings of the research, it is argued that distance learning is an effective way to prepare registered nurses to work in their particular community speciality. The importance of providing a supportive educational environment has also been shown as being fundamental to a distance-learning course.

Summary

This chapter has reviewed the aims of the research project and has shown how they have been met. The chapter has also shown that there were similarities in the findings from the two stages of the research project. This has enabled the model of supportive learning to be refined based on the research findings. It is proposed that the implementation of such a model of supportive learning would

enhance the effectiveness of educating community nursing courses by distance learning. It reflects the inter-relationships that may develop in the effectiveness of a distance-learning mode of course delivery. In addition, it is proposed that such a model could form the basis of the formative and summative evaluation of such a course. This would enable the process of the learning experience as well as the outcome to be measured. Alongside the biographical data that would be gathered as part of the educational programme itself, details could be obtained about the clinical placement setting. This would allow a data-base to be established of the range of placement experiences available. There now follows the conclusion.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In revisiting the original aims of the research project, it has been argued that they have been met. The educational and support needs of the diploma-level students were obtained by means of a survey. This showed that all adult students undertaking distance learning and full-time study face the competing demands of work, home and the demands placed upon them when studying. A proposal for the formative and summative evaluation of such a distance-learning course was offered using the criteria developed in the model of supportive learning.

Data gathered in interviews showed the issues raised by previous students, academics and community supervisors as being concerned with the overall educational experience. This adds support to the model that was developed which recognises the 'juggling' that has to be undertaken to complete distance learning in addition to work and home-life responsibilities. The need for students to gain access to library resources and library-seeking skills is another area requiring further investigation.

The following conclusions can be drawn about the effectiveness of educating community nurses by distance learning. The needs of students have been recognised by the literature review which addressed the areas of adult learning, distance learning within nursing and higher education and the support needs of distance learning. The data gathered in the research project added to the exploration of these needs. The term 'effectiveness' appeared to have a different meaning depending on the perspective of the user of the term and this has been confirmed by the findings. The research enabled a supportive model of learning to be developed and refined following data analysis. It also provided a framework for the formative and summative evaluation of a distance-learning course.

The special demands of the distance-learning student were originally labelled as being that of the mentor in the original aims of the research project, although

the term 'mentor' has to be interpreted in a flexible way. The special educational demand that emerged from the literature and research phase was the need for a supportive programme which could facilitate an effective learning experience. The 'mentor' could have the word 'tutor', 'other person', or 'community supervisor' substituted for it at particular stages of the course. The role of the mentor (in its literal sense) emerged as a much more informal process that the student would pursue, as needed.

The role and qualities needed by the community nurse 'mentor' (tutor/community supervisor) have been recognised within the model of supportive learning. In addition, it is envisaged that this model could be used in the education and orientation of both academic tutors and community supervisors. This has meant that from the data gathered from the interviews in the second phase of the project, the qualities and the role of the community nurse tutor/community supervisor have been identified within the model of supportive learning.

This, in turn, also identifies the educational requirements of both new and on-going community nurse tutors and supervisors. The main issue is the familiarity and on-going contact between the University and practice settings. The effectiveness of the proposed system of mentorship within the course has been included in the refinement process that occurred within the model of supportive learning. In addition, it proposes a framework for evaluation.

Therefore, the conclusions reached in this research project have both academic interest and practical application.

Academic interest

It is suggested that these findings will add to the literature of adult learners and distance education. In particular, it will make a contribution to the literature relating to the learning support needs of community nursing students.

The case-study of the established Canadian distance learning sector shows the potential for such equivalent development in British higher education.

As there has been little qualitative research published about the experiences of being a distance learner, it is proposed that this research will add to the understanding of the realities of being a distance learner.

It also shows the impact of an alternative mode of course delivery on academics and community supervisors who are involved in a course, and suggests a strategy for their orientation. This work may give guidance to other academics who are involved in developing distance learning courses.

The findings of the research recognise the enormous demands that distance-learning courses make on academic staff and also acknowledges the need for greater understanding in the conventional university system with regard to the development of such courses.

Finally, a new model of supportive learning has been developed based on the work of this research project. It is hoped that this will make a contribution to the education and nursing body of knowledge.

Practical application of the research

It is proposed that the model of supportive learning could be used within distance education programmes in three ways, namely,:-

- as a supportive framework for students
- as a preparatory framework for staff orientation and development
- as an evaluative framework

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this research project, further research work needs to be undertaken to test the model of supportive learning as well as the proposed

framework for evaluation. In addition, further research should be undertaken to explore the support needs of academics working in distance-learning settings. The practical recommendations made in this research project aim to develop the role of the tutor and community supervisor by :

- continuing to develop close links between theory and practice;
- offering a structured orientation programme for academic staff joining the course team;
- developing mutual strategies to support tutors and community supervisors, particularly with course development;
- orientating external tutors to the demands of distance learning.

The research project has evolved considerably since its beginning in 1991. The changes in community nursing have continued to present practitioners with on-going challenges. The need for an educational programme that will prepare post-registration nurses to respond to this changing situation is even more relevant today in 1995. This confirms the need to develop the students' abilities in self-directed learning and the transferable skills of problem-solving, information retrieval and coping with change.

The community nurse can be offered an effective learning programme by distance learning provided that they are offered structured learning support relevant to their learning needs. When offered in this way, distance learning is a valuable mode of course delivery to students who choose not to (or are unable to) enrol in full-time education. However, in this sense, distance learning does not mean learning in isolation. It is hoped that this research project will promote the inclusion of student support as a mainstream activity within nursing, distance and higher educational settings.

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APPENDIX I : THE PROVISION OF DISTANCE EDUCATION IN NURSING

1. Africa

Degree Programmes

The University of South Africa in Pretoria offers a choice of six routes through its BA in Nursing programme for registered nurses who take a minimum of three years to complete the course of their choice which is made up of approximately 12 subject modules. The main method utilised is printed and correspondence texts, along discussion groups and tutorial support.

There is also a Master of Arts programme for nursing science available through this university.

Continuing Education Programmes

In Africa, the African Medical and Research Foundation (AMREF) in Kenya and Tanzania have been at the forefront of continuing education programmes by distance education since the 1970s, reflecting the huge distances and scattered nature of the health-care workforce. This approach has enabled health-care workers to respond rapidly to changing health-care needs, and an example of this is the AIDS course which was developed in 1991 which was piloted successfully and is awaiting Ministry of Health approval. There are at least 9 print-based courses and 11 audio courses on offer relating to a wide range of communicable and community health issues, ante-natal and obstetric care and mental health. There are approximately 2000 students enrolled on AMREF's programmes.

On a similar basis, the Distance Teaching Units of the Ministry of Health in both Uganda and Zimbabwe offer courses on immunisation and diarrhoeal disease, again reflecting the priorities of primary health care and showing the responsiveness of distance education.

2. Asia

Degree Programmes

The Hong Kong Baptist College offers a Bachelor of Health Science in Nursing (Stage 1) course as does the Christian Medical College in Vellore, India.

Continuing Education Programmes

There were entries on the database reflecting the provision of such programmes through the Open University in Bangladesh and Provincial Radio and Television Universities in China. The approaches of these courses demonstrates the print-based and audio-based structure of distance education.

In Kuala Lumpur, the Diploma in Occupational Health Nursing course developed at the Robert Gordon University has been offered since 1993 and will be followed by the introduction of the BA in Occupational Health and Safety programme in the autumn of 1996.

3. North and South America

Degree Programmes

As mentioned earlier, the provision by Canadian universities will be discussed in further detail later in this chapter.

The United States of America also saw a move towards distance education as discussed by Fulmer et al (1992) beginning in the 1970s. This was in response to local consumer demand, with a more technological approach being deemed suitable for their students to promote the interactive facilities that distance education can offer. However, there is not the structure of the Canadian programmes evident in the USA, possibly because the American system of nurse education has been at graduate-level for a considerable length of time.

Two references were found on the database to universities in the USA offering degree-level courses for nurses by distance learning, namely, St. Joseph's College in Maine and the University of New Mexico. In addition, the Intercollegiate Centre for Nursing Education in Spokane, Washington State serves three colleges of nursing. In South America, reference was also found to the Universidad Nacional Autonoma de Honduras.

Continuing Education Programmes

Three references were found to universities in the USA which offered continuing educational courses by distance learning. They are, Indiana State University, the University of Southern Colorado and the University of Wisconsin, Madison.

In South America, there are examples of continuing education programmes being offered within the higher education sector, for example, the Universidad Nacional Autonoma de Mexico and the Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil.

4. Australasia

Williams (1993) reports of the interest in top-up degrees for qualified nurses in Australia (identified as conversion courses) having begun in the late 1960s and gradually gaining recognition and acceptance in Australasia since then. Due to the geographical nature of this continent, distance education was developed as an appropriate way of providing education to a widely scattered workforce.

Similarly, in New Zealand, the need for more advanced education for nurses has been identified and co-ordinated by the Open Learning Project within the Open Polytechnic of New Zealand (Horsburgh 1992) to ensure a high standard of continuing education, a flexible approach and the meeting of the educational needs of registered nurses and midwives.

The Charles Stuart University in Bathurst, New South Wales offers a B. Health Science Programme for registered nurses aged 21 and over with printed correspondence texts being prepared in-house as well as weekend workshops and telephone tutorials. The student has to complete 24 credit courses.

On the Wagga-Wagga campus a three year programme is available for registered nurses who hold a hospital-based certificate course, so that they gain exemption from completing the whole course as outlined above.

The Curtin University of Technology in Western Australia offers a programme for registered nurses which is equivalent to 2 years study by the use of print-based, audio and video material, as well as face-to-face tutoring and teleconferencing.

Deakin University has five campus sites which offer study access throughout Victoria for registered nurse students undertaking the Bachelor in Nursing course.

Since 1990, the Edith Cowan University in Western Australia offers a distance learning Bachelor of Nursing over a two-year period. It does not have any compulsory residential components, with students being sent text and audio-based material.

Flinders University in Southern Australia offers a 72 unit programme that can be undertaken over a 2-4 year period to enable registered nurses gain a Bachelor in Nursing.

In Victoria, Monash University offers a Bachelor in Applied Science (Nursing) course when students undertake 16 units over a four-year programme. Attendance at week-end and extended week-end schools are considered to be an important part of the programme and they have a system of student liaison officers who work off-campus.

The University of Central Queensland offers a four year degree programme by external study for registered nurses with a combination of text-based material, teleconferencing and some residential components.

In the Bachelor of Nursing course at the University of New England, course material is despatched by the distance education centre, and this is based on text/audio/video based material supplemented by some residential components. Within its campus in Northern Rivers, diplomates are exempted from 4 of the 12 units required for the completion of the Bachelor in Health Science.

The University of Southern Queensland offers a Bachelor of Nursing programme that extends over a four-year period mainly based on correspondence texts.

The University of Tasmania offers a Bachelor of Nursing programme that is restricted to Tasmanian residents and is more integrated with the full-time programme. There are a sequenced set of units with local liaison groups being established for students enrolled on similar units.

Continuing Education Programmes

Many references were found on the database with regard to distance education programmes within this category being offered in Australia and New Zealand. Many of these courses reflected the provision of skills-updating courses, with examples being the Audiometry course offered by the Open Training and Education network and orientation course for occupational health nursing as well as the Australian Royal College of Nursing offering courses in palliative care, patient management courses in diabetes, neurology, acute respiratory problems and ECGs.

The University of Otago in New Zealand offers a post-graduate diploma in Obstetrics while Massey University offers a Diploma-level course in Nursing Studies.

5. Europe

Degree Programmes

The only current example of a distance education degree course for nurses in the United Kingdom is the BA in Community Health Nursing/BA in Nursing course offered by the Robert Gordon University in Aberdeen, although degree level courses are being developed through the South Bank University and the Nursing Times Open Learning programmes.

Continuing Education

In the United Kingdom, the pioneering Diploma in Nursing by Distance Learning was established by the South Bank Polytechnic in London in the mid 1980s which signified the start of the interest in distance education in the United Kingdom. Regional study centres were established to overcome the problems associated with the counselling of students in distant locations (Robinson 1988). Subsequently, a professional studies course and advanced diploma in midwifery was developed at the South Bank polytechnic in 1990, with financial support being granted by the Department of Health (McAnulty 1992).

A print-based continuing education programme for nurses is offered by Barnet College in the United Kingdom and similar courses are offered through the Open College, Open Learning Foundation and the Open University itself.

Kilroy's college in Eire which was formerly the Irish Correspondence College offered a diploma level course in nursing.

The Nursing Times open learning course has addressed the needs of enrolled nurses who are wishing to convert their qualifications to first level, with the successful conversion programme which they offer and organisations such as Marie Curie have developed distance learning packages credited by an institute of higher education.

APPENDIX II : QUESTIONNAIRE

1 a. Please indicate your area of specialism:

District Nursing

☐

Health Visiting

☐

Occupational Health Nursing

☐

1b. Please indicate whether you held any of the following academic qualifications in addition to your RGN at the beginning of your course:

Certificate-level qualification in nursing

☐

Diploma-level qualification in nursing

☐

Degree

☐

Other:

1c. Please indicate whether you completed your course on a:

Full-time basis

☐

Distance-Learning basis

☐

2a. **Some people feel unsure of their studying abilities at the start of an academic course.**
Would you agree with this statement?

YES ☐

NO ☐

SOMETIMES ☐

Please describe briefly how you felt about your studying abilities at the start of your course.

2b. **Please indicate whether you required any of the following studying support at the start of your course.**

- Guidance on developing a regular studying pattern ☐
- Guidance on note-taking ☐
- Guidance on prioritising course work ☐
- Guidance on reading skills ☐
- Guidance on the writing of required essays etc. ☐

Other

2c. Please indicate who met your studying support needs during the course.

Course tutor in the Department of Nursing

☐

Subject Specialist

☐

Another student on the course

☐

Nurse manager/Employer

☐

Family member

☐

Other Person

2d. What did you think of the formal guidance given during your course relating to study skills ?

No formal guidance was given

☐

The guidance given was worthless

☐

The guidance given was helpful

☐

The guidance given was excellent

☐

Please would you now answer a few questions on the structure of the tutorials offered to you during your course.

3a. Individual tutorials were offered:-

regularly during the course

☐

only when requested by individual student

☐

3b. Tutorials were offered:-

on a face-to-face basis

by telephone

3c. Please describe, briefly, if the tutorial system offered to you during your course helped you in your study.

3d. Please circle the number which corresponds with your answer;

'I am satisfied with the learning experience that I had on the course'

strongly disagree

disagree

neutral

agree

strongly agree

1

2

3

4

5

3e. 'I think I gained a lot of knowledge on my course'

strongly disagree

disagree

neutral

agree

strongly agree

1

2

3

4

5

3f. In your opinion, what would have enhanced your learning during the course?

Thank you very much for completing this questionnaire and returning it to me at the Department of Nursing in the pre-paid envelope.

APPENDIX III

INTERVIEW CONTACT SUMMARY SHEET

TYPE OF CONTACT :

NAME OF RESPONDENT:

DATE OF CONTACT:

1.The main issues or themes that were addressed at this interview were:

2. The summary of information in relation to the interview schedule:

3. Items that need to be followed up from this interview.

APPENDIX IV

GRADUATE INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

Date of interview:

Place:

Introduction

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study. Anything that you tell me will be confidential. In addition, I will send you a copy of the transcript of our discussion and you would be able to make any corrections at that stage. If I am unclear about anything that is said, I may speak to you again for clarification.

“Please would you tell me about your overall experience of being a distance learner”

CHECKLIST OF TOPIC AREAS

- beginning the course
- distance learning work
- advantages/disadvantages of distance learning
- clinical placement
- mentors
- completing the course

Conclusion of interview

Once again, can I thank you for letting me speak to you about these experiences. I will be in touch with you again in approximately one month's time.

APPENDIX V

Coding list for graduate interviews

Descriptive list of categories and codes

Codes

Age and ability	AL-age
Time lapse	AL-tim
Self-confidence	AL-con
Apprehension	AL-app
Academic level	AL-lev
Putting thoughts on paper	AL-wr
Time management/organisation	AL-man
Comparison to full-time	AL-full
Being listened to	AL-list
Juggling roles	AL-roles
Anxiety	AL-anx
Changes in self at end of course	AL-chan
Building on knowledge/experience	AL-exp
Effect on family	AL-fam
Isolation	DL-iso
knowledge of distance education	DL-info
Core weeks	DL-core
Leaving at end of the week	DL-leav
Meeting other students	DL-stu
Networking with other students	DL-net
Identifying with students	DL-recog
Evaluation of course	DL-eval
Fast-tracking	DL-track
Material	DL-mat
Pattern of work	DL-pat
Summative work	DL-sum
How to succeed	DL-suc
Finishing the course	DL-fin
Usefulness to practice	DL-pract
Integration with work	DL-integ
Starting the course	Sup-start
Library provision	Sup-lib
Study skills	Sup-skills
Telephone tutorials	Sup-tel
Getting to know tutors	Sup-tut
Contacting tutors	Sup-contact
Mentors	Sup-men
CPT/assessors	Sup-cpt
Usefulness of tutorials	Sup-use
Feedback	Sup-feed
Guidance	Sup-gui
Quality of core week teaching	Qual-core
Relevance to discipline	Qual-rel
quality of course overall	Qual-course

APPENDIX VI

COMMUNITY SUPERVISOR INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

Introduction

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study. Any information you give me will remain confidential.

1. Name:

Location:

2. How would you describe your role as an assessor/CPT?

2a. Do you enjoy this aspect of your role?

Yes..... No.....(Probe for details)

3. Have you had experience of assessing full-time students as well as distance-learning students?

Yes..... No.....(move on to question 4)

Can you explain any similarities and differences between full-time and distance learners in your experience?

4. What preparation have you had to enable you to assess students?

5. Can you tell me what the strengths and weaknesses of this preparation have been?

6. What professional and personal qualities do you think are needed to make someone an effective assessor?

7. In your opinion, what are the positive and negative features about distance education for community nurses?

8. On a scale of one to five (one = very ineffective and five = very effective), how effective do you think this course is in the education of community nurses?

1 2 3 4 5

9. Are there any other comments you would like to suggest that would enable closer links to be made between the theory and practice components of this course?

Conclusion

It is possible that I may contact you again for further clarification and I will send you an edited version of our conversation for you to verify. If there is anything that you feel is unrepresentative, you are completely free to amend it.

Thank you very much for your assistance.

APPENDIX VII

ACADEMIC COLLEAGUE INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

Introduction

Thank you very much for agreeing to participate in this study. Any information you give me will remain confidential.

1. In terms of educational experience, how effective do you think the BA in Community Health Nursing by distance learning is?

2. Please would you comment on how the BA in Community Health nursing could become more effective, in your opinion.

Thank you very much for your assistance. The main issues that you raised have been as follows.....

APPENDIX VIII A PROPOSAL FOR THE EVALUATION OF A DISTANCE-LEARNING COURSE

It is proposed that an illuminative, action-research evaluation is undertaken to measure the effectiveness of a distance learning course. Initially, the suggestions will be made about the quantitative data that should be evaluated. This would focus on the existing biographical data held on students to determine the following objectives:

- the geographical location of students
- the progress of students through the course in terms of the length of time taken for course completion, module results and student drop-out rates
- the age-range of students.

This could be achieved by a content-search of existing student files. It would establish the number of staff working on the course and how well they were prepared to work in distance-learning. It would determine the resources available for the course.

The qualitative part of the evaluation system would aim to address the effectiveness of the support offered to students during the course as well as their overall learning experience. A suggested method for data-gathering would be by questionnaire, based on the criteria established in the supportive model of learning. Questions would be asked based on a Likert-type scale and address issues related to:-

- the characteristics of the tutor
- the progress through the course
- contact with other students
- the relationship between the student and tutor.

This would enable the effectiveness of the overall learning experience to be evaluated.

Within the tutor characteristics, the following criteria would be measured. They would include:

- the helpfulness of the tutor
- their approachability and knowledge about the subject
- the ability to build self-confidence
- to give information about the course

In addition, the information that was given about the course and the ability to offer help with the written work would be evaluated. Finally, within this section, the amount of time that each team member has to spend with students and the continuity of support could be measured. From the students' perspective within the criteria, the ease of access could be established, the relevance of the course tutor and their effectiveness could be measured and in addition, students would be able to establish their satisfaction with the course.

The course content criteria would enable students and tutors to evaluate the structure of the course and its relevance to practice. The student would be able to estimate whether they had undertaken a course that offered value for money. The amount and timing of the course information given to the students at the various stages of the course would be evaluated within this criteria as well as monitoring how flexible the course structure was. Finally, the contents of this criteria would enable a judgment to be made about the availability of resources for the course.

The student characteristic criteria would enable the student to evaluate their own development from the beginning of the course through the suggested three stages of the model of supportive learning. By the end of the course, they could rate their ability to be self-directed and rate their transferable skills.

The other criterion to be evaluated within this framework would be the ability to contact and network with other students on the course. The utility of the required

periods of attendance at the University and their content would be measured within this part.

It would be intended that the data be gathered on an annual basis by the course team. The data would be analysed by the course team, with a report being prepared. It would also satisfy the university's requirements to gather data as well as giving the course team specific information to enable the effectiveness of the course to be maintained and improved on a regular basis. It also shows the methodical nature of the proposed evaluative structure.

It is realised though, that students will only give genuine feedback within an atmosphere of trust. As noted in the graduate interviews, one of the tutorial staff was found to be intimidating. This would prevent such feedback being offered. It is also recognised that a trusting relationship between a student and tutor may take a considerable time to develop, or not develop at all.

As suggested earlier, the model of supportive learning could provide the criteria against which the effectiveness of the support offered to students could be measured. It is suggested that the proposed system of mentorship as defined in this context, could be evaluated using the formative and summative system.

The development of a BA in community health nursing/BA in nursing by distance learning

Sally M R Lawton

A new degree course in community health care nursing has been developed at The Robert Gordon University, with validation having taken place on 30 June 1992. It is innovative as it is being offered to students by a part-time distance learning route only, over a minimum time of 18 months and a maximum time of 3.5 years, and is replacing the full-time diploma courses offered in district nursing, health visiting and occupational health nursing. As well as the community health nursing route, a BA in nursing has also been developed for any registered nurse who wishes to top-up to degree level.

INTRODUCTION

The Department of Nursing at The Robert Gordon University in Aberdeen had been offering post-registration community nursing courses for many years, culminating in the Diploma in Professional Studies in health visiting; the Diploma in Professional Studies in nursing-district nursing and the Diploma in Professional Studies in nursing-occupational health nursing with this latter course having been offered by distance learning since 1990.

In the autumn of 1991, it became clear that it was time to appraise critically the delivery and content of the current courses in light of changes within nursing itself, and within the newly formed Department of Nursing. This paper will discuss the reasons for the development of the

Batchelor of Arts (BA) in Community Health Nursing/BA in Nursing and outline the structure of the new distance learning course.

PROFESSIONAL ASPECTS

The course appraisals coincided with the publication of the UK Central Council Consultative Report on the 'proposals for the future of community education and practice', in the autumn of 1991, with its emphasis on the sharing of core community elements and it was used as the basis for the new course structure. However, it was decided that the specialist roles of district nursing, health visiting and occupational health nursing should be retained.

EDUCATIONAL ASPECTS

It was proposed to ensure academic progression for post-registration nurses by making the new BA in Community Health Nursing course at

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unclassified degree level. This seemed highly relevant in view of the 1992 Scheme of Training being at diploma level. It was also felt that studying at degree level would promote the development of the transferable skills of decision making and problem solving within each individual student.

In view of the success of the Diploma in Occupational Health Nursing by distance learning, it was decided to adopt the same strategy for all community nurses. A recent internal statistical analysis showed no significant differences in the results of students undergoing the Diploma in Occupational Health Nursing by distance learning in comparison to students undertaking the course by traditional attendance.

This educational approach allows learning to take place within the workplace setting and allows theory to closely relate to practice within the existing framework of community practice teaching in district nursing and health visiting and the mentorship scheme within occupational health nursing.

The structure of the new course also allows existing community nurses to upgrade their qualification to degree level by distance learning.

ECONOMIC ASPECTS

Over the past few years, there has been a gradual decrease in the number of students receiving Health Board secondment and funding for community nurse education, although student interest and the number of enquiries has remained constant. There had also been a steady growth in the number of students willing to self-fund their way through the 'traditional' full-time courses.

However, opportunities for students being employed in permanent jobs following the full-time course became uncertain, and nurses currently in a permanent post are naturally reluctant to leave a job to gain further education when it is probable that no employment is available on completion of such a course. The decision therefore, to offer the course by a part-time distance learning route means that students will be able to study whilst remaining in their existing post for

the duration of part one of the course, and then decide whether to apply for community secondment to complete the second part of the course. In the event that no funding is available, they may complete the BA in nursing syllabus instead of the BA in Community Health Nursing.

From the economic situation within the department, there was much overlap of the course curricula which meant a duplication of resources, both from lecturing staff time and for those students who wished to gain a second community qualification. Despite the common module shared between the district nursing and health visiting students, this overlap remained and there has not been any formal teaching links between the occupational health nursing course and other community nursing courses. This new degree course will enable all community nurses to share the common elements of their courses, enhancing role understanding and shared knowledge.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE COURSE

As mentioned above, the course is being offered on a part-time distance learning route, divided into two main parts.

Part one of the course

This is the generic part of the BA in Community Health Nursing/BA in Nursing and contains the following six modules which have been identified as being relevant to all potential and existing community nurses studying at post-registration level:

- Professional Issues
- Management
- Behavioural Sciences
- Health Promotion
- Communication and Teaching
- Epidemiology and Research

Each module contains 80 hours of total learning time and requires attendance for 1 week at the University for each module core week. The student then goes back to their own base to

complete the remaining work of the module. The distance learning package contains a series of topic papers, supported by distance learning material written in conjunction with the Educational Development Unit at The Robert Gordon University. All the modules will be offered once during the academic year, and it will be possible to complete part one of the course in a minimum of 1 academic year and a maximum of 3 years.

Two of the modules, namely Professional Issues and Behavioural Sciences, have been set at SCOTCAT level II, with the remaining four modules set at SCOTCAT level III. This will mean that at the end of part one of the course, all students will have gained 320 SCOTCAT points (being equivalent to a diploma level award). The SCOTCAT system is the Scottish equivalent of the CNAA CATS system and works as follows.

In a full-time Scottish university undergraduate course, 4 years of study are allocated to an

Honours Degree (in England 3 years are taken to complete such a degree). Each year is allocated 120 points with the level being allocated to the year of study. Thus 360 SCOTCAT points would give the student the equivalent of an unclassified ordinary degree after 3 years of study and 480 SCOTCAT points would be awarded to an Honours degree after the fourth year of study.

This allocation of SCOTCAT points also allows a flexible entry system, depending on the previous experience of the student, and following individual proposals to The National Board for Nursing, Midwifery and Health Visiting for Scotland (NBS) for acceptance on to a modified course where appropriate. Four levels of entry have been devised as follows:

Entry Level One For those students who have a first level qualification and 2 years post-registration experience. They will normally have 200

Table 1
BA Community Health Nursing: BA Nursing: Course Progression

Proposed SCOTCAT Points	Entry Point		Degree content Part one	Degree content Part two	Exit Award
200	1. First Level Qualification	→	<div>* Behavioural Sciences</div> <div>* Professional Issues</div> <div>† Management</div> <div>† Communication & Teaching</div>	320 SCOTCAT points	380 SCOTCAT points
280	2. First Level Qualification & Certificate	→	<div>† Health Promotion</div>	<div>† Option One Theory and Practice Prescribed 'units' for DN, HV and OHN</div> <div>† Option Two Theory Prescribed and Optional 'units'</div>	<div>BA in Community Health Nursing – DN/HV/OHN</div>
300	3. 1992 Scheme of Training	→	<div>† Epidemiology & Research</div>	<div>† Theory Prescribed and Optional 'units'</div>	<div>BA in Nursing</div>
320	4. First Level Qualification & Diploma	→			

* SCOTCAT Level II; † SCOTCAT Level III

SCOTCAT points and will be required to complete all of part one and then part two of the course.

Entry Level Two is for those nurses with a first level qualification and a certificate in a community speciality. They will normally have 280 SCOTCAT points at the start of the course, and will have to complete two modules from part one and then part two of the course.

Entry Level Three is for those nurses with the 1992 Scheme of Training qualification and 2 years post-registration experience. They will normally have 300 SCOTCAT points at the start of the course and will have to complete one module from part one and then part two of the course. For the 1992 Scheme of Training nurse who wishes to top-up to degree level via the BA in nursing route, entry will be permitted following registration.

Entry Level Four is for those nurses with a first level qualification in nursing and a diploma in a nursing speciality. They will normally have 320 SCOTCAT points at the start of the course and will have to complete part two of the course only. The details of this entry system and the course progression are shown in Table 1.

Part two of the course

This is the specialist section of the degree course, and three options have been devised through it. At the end of the course, no matter which option is taken, students will have accumulated 380 SCOTCAT points. Part two is comprised of one large 240 hour module, made up of smaller units, and students will normally complete this part of the course over two academic terms. There will be a 2 week period of attendance at the university with a further 2 weeks available for tutorial support.

The three options are:

1. Option One: This option is designed for those students who are wanting to gain the BA in community health nursing as well as a professional qualification in either district

Table 2
Content of part two: option one

Prescribed units for BA in community health nursing – district nursing	
Unit name	Hours
Principles and practice of district nursing	80
Human development	40
Politics and health care	30
Screening protocols	30
Counselling	20
Nutrition	30
Nurse prescribing	10
Total	240
Prescribed units for BA in community health nursing – health visiting	
Principles and practice of health visiting	80
Human development	40
Politics and health care	30
Screening protocols	30
Counselling	20
Nutrition	30
Nurse prescribing	10
Total	240

Content of part two: option two

Prescribed units for BA in community health nursing – occupational health nursing	
Unit name	Hours
Principles and practice of occupational health nursing	50
Diseases of occupation and toxicology	40
Environmental issues	40
Screening protocols	40
Politics and workplace health	30
Counselling	20
Nutrition	20
Total	240

Table 3
Part two: Option two and BA in Nursing

Prescribed and optional units for BA in community health nursing/BA in nursing	
Unit name	Hours
Preparation of portfolio (prescribed)	20
Analysis of practice (prescribed)	60
Palliative care	80
Screening protocols	40
Counselling	40
Environmental issues	40
Nutrition	40
Family planning and human sexuality	40
General practice audit (finance and fund holding)	40
Complementary therapies	40
Workplace health	40
Health psychology	20

nursing, health visiting or occupational health nursing. These students will have to follow the prescribed units as shown in Table 2, with the additional taught and supervised practice requirements as stipulated for the particular specialty.

2. Option Two: This option is designed for those students who already have a qualification in district nursing, health visiting or occupational health nursing and wish to upgrade to a degree in community health nursing. These students will have two prescribed units and a choice of optional units to complete as shown in Table 3.
3. Option Three: This option has been designed for other community nurses who, at present, do not have a recognised professional qualification (e.g. practice and school nurses) or for any registered nurse who wishes to gain a BA in Nursing by distance learning. They will follow the same route as shown in Table 3 – the two prescribed units and a choice of optional units. The reason for having a different title in this part of the course is to avoid the confusion that could arise if people undertook a course but did not gain a recordable or registerable qualification.

Assessment and tutorial support during the course

The course is assessed by means of summative written work for each module in part one and a practice based dissertation in part two. Those students undertaking the BA in Community Health Nursing – option one will also have to complete successfully the taught and supervised practice elements, while the other students will be required to submit a portfolio of practice and an analysis of their practice.

It is recognised that the tutorial support that is needed during a distance learning course is vital and every student is offered two tutorial sessions

during each module core week. Each student is allocated a personal tutor within the Department of Nursing. Thereafter, a dedicated telephone line is available for regular telephone tutorial booking. It receives incoming calls only, so the lecturing staff cannot use it! There is also an answerphone, so that calls can be recorded whenever a student telephones. A fax machine has also been installed for use by tutors and students in order to maintain contact. Each personal tutor ensures that contact is made at least once a month with every student.

It could be argued that the new BA in Community Health Nursing is not a true distance learning course, due to the small amount of attendance required by the students, but each core week enables students to meet and form informal networks as well as letting them know that they are not working and studying in total isolation, which is very important for adult learners and particularly those individuals who have not studied for a long time.

Within the department, it is felt that this is an exciting and innovative development in nurse education. The response from potential students was overwhelming. Within a week of being advertised in the nursing press in September 1992, the department had received over 500 enquiries from all over the UK, so it would appear that there is indeed a demand for this type of course. The course is now full for the 1992/93 session, and students are being recruited for the 1993/4 session.

The educational challenge is for the Department of Nursing to deliver an effective flexible course of high quality that will provide the preparation for nurses wishing to work in the community as well as offering a meaningful educational experience for any registered nurse.

Reference

- UK Central Council 1991 Report on the Proposals for the Future of Community Education and Practice. UKCC, London

14 The Learning Needs of Adults Undertaking a Distance Learning Course in Nursing

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Summary: This paper intends to demonstrate how an andragogical approach to learning has been adopted in the design of a part-time distance learning course for nurses. It will also demonstrate that the transition for some adult learners who have been used to a more pedagogical approach may be problematic, needing support during the transitional phase.

All the students enrolling on the BA in Community Health Nursing/BA in Nursing course would be termed as being adult learners because they all have had at least five years experience of nursing, and the minimum age of a student would be 23.

Initially, it is proposed to outline the relevant theories of adult learning that have predominated the literature since the 1950s and then relate them to the theory of andragogy. This theory will then be applied to the distance learning course for nurses, highlighting potential areas of difficulty for the student coming into higher education for the first time.

THE PROCESS OF ADULT LEARNING

Lovell (1980) identified adulthood as the 'phase when we explore and exploit to the full the implications and the applications of the fundamental learning that we so rapidly acquired in childhood'. This implies that the adult has the ability to apply their existing knowledge to new situations and discover, perhaps, that what they had definite views about are possibly not so concrete. It also means that in coming to higher education, they will bring with them their experience of the learning they underwent as a child. If this was not a positive experience, the transition may be difficult for them. As nurse education has leaned towards the pedagogical approach, then their experiences of their most recent academic experience may also not be very helpful in the adult learning environment. However, in the adult learning situation, Lovell (1980) argued that 'the more that it will enable him to analyse and organise new information'. This implies that the teacher in adult education has to try and relate as much as possible to a student's previous experience. However, there is a fundamental lack of self-confidence within adults who may rely on their school experience to be an accurate guide to their learning ability, especially in the realms of higher education. As Lovell (ibid.) states, 'they overlook their more recent extensive informal learning' as though it is irrelevant to learning. Informal learning may occur through experience as well as through formal education. This suggests that the very term learning means different things to different people.

Learning theory has been approached in two major ways, by the stimulus-response associationalists, e.g., Thorndike, Skinner and Pavlov and the gestalt approach of Kohler, Koffka, Lewin and Wertheimer.

The Gestalt approach which is more applicable in higher education, can be defined as the learner who 'attempts to organise and integrate what he perceives or studies in order to achieve an overall pattern' (Lovell ibid.). Perception was the main interest of this approach with Wertheimer identifying four laws of perception which he thought determined meaningfulness. They were 'similarity, proximity, closure and good continuation' (Lovell ibid.). Kohler who had studied problem-solving with chimpanzees found that they appeared to make sense of a problem by changing the nature of the problem to enable them to solve it, but work of a similar nature carried out by Wertheimer with children demonstrated that, rather than restructuring the problem, the children were relating the problem to their past experience in trial and error learning from the stimulus-response approach. This has implications for the mature student. If they have a very negative stimulus-response learning pattern at school, it is possible that this may inhibit their learning in higher education. In turn, distance learning may compound these feelings in view of the potential isolation that a student may feel when carrying out the self-study phase of a distance-learning course.

Gagne reached the conclusion from research work carried out in the early 1960s that human

learning tends to be hierarchical, identifying 8 levels of learning that can be achieved by a human being. He argued that internal and external factors have to be taken into account at each level, before learning can take place and enable the individual to progress to the next level of learning. The eight levels of learning that Gagne identified are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Gagne's eight levels of learning

Level One - Signal
Level Two - Stimulus-Response
Level Three - Motor Chain
Level Four - Verbal Chain
Level Five - Multiple Discrimination
Level Six - Concept Learning
Level Seven - Acquisition of Rules
Level Eight - Problem Solving

The relevance of this hierarchical system to adult learning is that from levels five to eight, there is more concentration on the intellectual skills that an individual may have when mastery of the lower levels has been achieved. Interest is then focused on an individual's ability to acquire new concepts, and develop the skills of adaptation. This is particularly relevant to nursing as a nurse has to continually adapt his/her knowledge to different clinical situations. However, as previously noted, it may be somewhat harder to adapt to a new educational system, as well as combining this with distance learning. To ensure that this transition is made as straightforward as possible, the information presented to the adult learner has to be as meaningful as possible. The research of Craik and Lockhart (ibid. Lovell 1980) in adult learning demonstrated the process whereby adults learn verbal or written material. They demonstrated that adults retain the meaning of the information, rather than the actual words. This is done, they proposed by several analytical processes that occur to prepare the long-term memory. These processes are:

- The appearance or the sound of the word
- The syntactic context
- The semantic content
- The accommodation within existing experience

'The accommodation of new material can only take place when the learner already possesses related information in the long-term memory store to which the new material can be accommodated' (ibid. Lovell, 1980).

This has major implications for the teaching of adults. If the information can be related in any way to the adult's existing knowledge, then there is more chance of learning occurring. In the design of the distance learning material, it is essential to follow this approach to facilitate learning. From this research, information received by the learner in either verbal or written form is indistinguishable.

The concept of meaningful learning is not new. Bartlett recognised its importance in 1932, as did Piaget in 1950. Much work in this area was carried out by Ausubel et al in 1978, and his model of meaningful learning was strongly influenced by how new learning is influenced by existing knowledge.

He identified two forms of learning ie. meaningful and meaningless learning. Lovell (ibid.) argues that 'perhaps the most important contribution a teacher can make to the adult's learning of cognitive information is to select, organise, present and translate new material in such a way that the learner can appreciate its relationship with ideas he already has clearly established in his memory'.

Research that was carried out by Bruner et al in 1956, demonstrated that individuals attain concepts in two different ways.

Scanning

When an individual comes across a new concept, they scan through the material to search for its meaning by way of hypothesis formulation. Other examples of this new concept which the individual comes across would also be scanned to look for corroboration to reinforce the hypothesis and thus give meaning to the concept. In many ways this is similar to stimulus/response learning. The individual goes through a period of hypothesis-testing to acquire the new concept.

Focusing

In this approach, the individual makes the first concept that is met in the new information the basis of the hypothesis. If, on gaining further information, a contradictory element is discovered, then it replaces the first hypothesis.

With either approach, the individual has to seek out the relevant attributes of a concept, exclude the irrelevant attributes and then apply the concept to existing knowledge. The reassuring element in this is that adults continually do this, despite the low opinion that many adult learners have about their own learning abilities and intelligence.

It has been argued that personality may influence intelligence, and work carried out by Eysenck in the 1960s suggested that it may determine the preferred learning style of an individual. Eysenck suggested that this was due to various physiological differences in the stem reticular system. He exemplified this by the introvert who, he argued, is more easily classically conditioned. This has implications for the students on a course who may find it difficult to adapt to an andragogical approach where the quest for meaningful learning is fostered.

Similar work carried out by Shadbolt and Leith in 1967 identified that 'personality differences may influence which method of teaching is most successful with an individual' (ibid. Lovell). They discovered that extroverts seem to prefer the more unstructured teaching approach. This does not mean that introverts cannot participate in a course which is less formally structured, but perhaps, more supportive guidance would have to be made available for them. There may well be some validity in determining the personality types of the learners on a course to acknowledge such varieties in the influence of personality on the learning/teaching situation. Knox (1978) agrees with this point when he describes a system whereby the personal learning styles and characteristics of an individual are assessed, with a supportive plan devised so that 'adults who have relatively ineffective learning strategies can be helped to adopt strategies, that for other similar adults are more effective'.

Knox (1978) continues this argument by stating 'competent professionals assist adult clients to obtain understanding of adult development and learning for themselves'. This reinforces the author's argument that the teacher of adult learners should be a facilitator of learning and, very often, a source of confidence-building for the individual student.

The influential work of Marton, Pask and Saljo in the 1970's and 1980s looked at the way individual students approached learning, identifying differences between surface, deep and strategic approaches to learning as well as various styles of learning.

Following the above details on the theory of adult learning, attention will now be given to the meanings of pedagogy and andragogy.

Knowles has been at the forefront of the research work in this field of educational research. Writing in 1985, he identified certain characteristics of the pedagogical approach that are associated with the traditional model of learning and teaching and the five assumptions identified below form the extreme pedagogical view. They are:-

- The learner is a passive recipient of knowledge.
- The teacher's previous knowledge and experience is more important than the students'.
- Age determines how ready a student is to learn what they are told to learn.
- Learning particular subjects is related to a set of prescribed limits on content.
- Motivation is an external force.

If a student comes in to higher education holding any or all of these assumptions, then it will be extremely difficult for them to understand the concept of self-directed learning. They will be expecting to be **told** what to learn and moreover, **when** to learn it. This has been classed by colleagues as the 'spoon-feeding' approach. Gardiner (1989) reviewed the current literature on adults as learners, identifying that the notion of 'teacher knows best is politically powerful'. He suggests that this implies that the teacher can feel in control and give a sense of order to the teaching role. This argument could be applied in nurse training which, until relatively recently, has fitted into a regimented hierarchical structure.

However, the student cannot be expected to change his/her experience immediately, but needs guidance and support during a course to come to terms with a more andragogical approach. Knowles (1985) shares this **view** saying that adults suddenly confronted with an andragogical approach will 'tend to be confused, resistant and resentful'.

Research carried out by Tough in 1979 revealed that on the examination of 20 projects on self-directed learning, many adults lost the ability to be self-directing when they entered higher education. The idea of preparing adults for an andragogical approach is supported by research carried out by Cheren in 1978 who suggested that following assistance, it is the preferred way of learning. This view, in turn, is reinforced by Knights and McDonald's research work carried out in 1977 who demonstrated that adult learners possess the characteristics identified in an andragogical approach. This suggests that it could, in fact, be very frustrating for an adult learner to be placed in a pedagogical learning situation!

Knowles identified five characteristics of an andragogical approach, noting that 'these two models are seen as being parallel, not antithetical'. The five characteristics are:-

- The learner is self-directing and an active partner in learning.
- Experience is vital to the learning process.
- The individual feels the need to learn when they are searching for new information.
- The individual is highly motivated.
- They approach learning to further themselves.

Knowles (1985) identifies this as the 'need to know' factor. This approach demonstrates that the teacher of adult higher education should be a facilitator of learning, ensuring that the educational climate is right to promote learning in the individual student. This means that there should be a mutual trust between the student and teacher, with close involvement in the diagnosis of the learning needs of the student. This process would develop throughout the course, with the teacher facilitating the evaluation process that the learner would carry out.

THE DESIGN OF THE COURSE

The BA in Community Health Nursing/BA in Nursing was developed within the department of nursing from the existing full-time diploma-level courses in district nursing and health visiting. The new course structure was based on the existing distance learning course for occupational health nurses which had been run in the department since 1990 and on the proposal documentation that had been circulated by the United Kingdom Central Council for Nursing in

the autumn of 1991. The BA in community health nursing/BA in Nursing by distance learning has been designed to approach learning from the andragogical approach. The course has been structured so that there is student contact for one week of each module. This ensures that the student and tutor can get to know one another, and can jointly assess the individual's learning needs related to their previous experiences, both educational and professional. It also gives the student and tutor a chance to discuss the expectations that the student has regarding the course and their perceived abilities. Many students on the course report feeling unsure of their studying ability, especially if they have not been in a 'formal' learning situation for a long time. They discount their informal learning as irrelevant and are surprised to be assured that in many areas, they have more knowledge and skill than the lecturing staff! As Rogers notes (1989) adult learners fear that 'they might be making themselves look foolish, or that they might be exposing themselves to failure.' The core module weeks contain workshop and group sessions, which encourage participation by the students. As Bailey and Moore (1989) report from work with the Open University, 'mature students in a largely distance learning education system gain unique benefits from intensive periods of face-to-face academic work'. It also allows for networking to occur with fellow students, and for contacts to be made for the self-study phase of the course.

This is also an opportunity for the student to begin to realise that their opinions are important, which in turn can raise their self-esteem and confidence. Knox points this out when he says 'An initial reduction in self-confidence tends to be replaced by a increased sense of accomplishment, confidence, self-esteem and assertiveness' (1978). This is also reinforced by Holsgrove (1991) who has identified the 'virtuous spiral', meaning that the 'more you discuss, relate and apply what you are learning, the more successful your learning will be and the better the use you can make of the information learned'. Each student will take their own time to build their self-confidence, and part of the aim of the course is to support the student through this process.

When the student goes back to their home base to carry out the self-study phase of the course, the tutor can maintain contact on a regular basis with the student by telephone, fax or letter and know who they are speaking to.

The modular packs are structured to encourage the student to use their own experiences to gain further knowledge and understanding of the subject under discussion. This reinforces the relevance of the material to their work experience. Most of the students are completing the modules over two months, which eases the pressure of rushing to meet deadlines.

The assessment phase of each module has been designed to ensure that examples can be used from the student's practice or experience, to emphasise the importance of their existing knowledge. There are deadlines imposed for the submission of essays which Kay and Rumble (1981) identify as being the 'group' way of packing work, i.e. all students have the same deadline for the submission of work. There is one piece of written work per module that has to be completed, and written feedback is given to the students. As in the module packs, the assignments that are set are aimed to be relevant to the work situation.

CONCLUSION

This paper has described how the theories of adult education can be applied to the design of a BA in community health nursing by distance learning. It has emphasised that while the andragogical approach should be encouraged, some students may find the transition from previous educational experience difficult, and that this may be compounded by the fact that the course is offered by way of distance learning. It was then shown how the course has been designed to allow for the optimum conditions to exist to support the student on this course and forms the basis of further study in this area.

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Returning to Study as an Adult Learner

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This article reports the findings of a study within a department of nursing into the attitudes of students, undertaking diploma level post-registration community courses, towards their ability to study. One hundred and sixty-nine nurses were invited to complete a questionnaire which asked them to describe their feelings about their learning abilities at the commencement of the course. Times lapses since previous educational courses range from four to 30 years. The findings were similar to other studies in higher education settings with implications for students, course planners and teaching styles.

Diese Abhandlung berichtet über die Ergebnisse einer Studie, die sich mit den Einstellungen von Studenten und Studentinnen in einer Abteilung zur Ausbildung von Krankenhauspflegepersonal befasst und mit ihrer Fähigkeit zum Studium. Es handelt sich um Diplomkurse in der Gemeinschaft für staatlich anerkanntes Pflegepersonal. 169 Personen aus dem Pflegepersonal wurden gebeten, einen Fragebogen auszufüllen, der sie ersuchte, ihre Gedanken und Gefühle im Bezug auf ihre Befähigung zum Studieren am Beginn ihres Kurses zu beschreiben. Seit der letzten Untersuchung waren 4–30 Jahre vergangen. Die Ergebnisse waren denen von anderen Studien auf dem Sektor weiterführender Ausbildung ähnlich und enthalten Konsequenzen für Studenten, Studentinnen, Kursplaner und Lehrmethoden.

Este artículo presenta los resultados de un estudio, conducido en un departamento de enfermería, de las actitudes de los estudiantes siguiendo carreras de diploma en estudios sociales hacia su aptitud para sus estudios. 169 enfermeras fueron invitadas a rellenar un cuestionario describiendo sus sentimientos hacia sus capacidades para aprender, esto a principios de la carrera. El intervalo entre estos cursos y los precedentes estudios hechos fue de cuatro a 30 años. Los resultados fueron similares a los de otros investigaciones hechas en institutos de enseñanza superior y llevan consecuencias para estudiantes, educadores y métodos de enseñanza.

Les conclusions tirées d'un examen des attitudes d'étudiants infirmiers à l'égard de leur capacité de suivre les cours au niveau du diplôme 'post-inscrit' d'études sociales sont annoncées dans cet article. 169 infirmières furent invitées à remplir un questionnaire sur leurs sentiments concernant leur capacité d'étudier au commencement du cours. Les délais entre ces études et les précédentes étaient très divers – de quatre jusqu'à trente ans. Ces conclusions ressemblaient à celles d'autres examens faits dans des instituts d'éducation supérieure et entraînent des conséquences envers les étudiants, ceux qui créent les cours et les méthodes pédagogiques.

For any student who is in the application or preparation phase of an educational course, especially within a university department, a whole range of emotions are probably being experienced,

from the 'what on earth am I letting myself in for' feeling right through to feelings of anticipation about 'stretching your mind'. This article aims to report the findings of a study carried out within a department of nursing on

the attitudes of students who were undertaking diploma-level post-registration community courses between 1990 and 1992 towards their studying abilities, as well as relating these findings to other studies carried out on adult learners.

When embarking on a course within higher education for the first time, the uncertainties that may be felt could be related to the 'unknown quantity' of higher education itself, compounded by a perceived lack of knowledge about academic levels and the ability to study at a new level. Rogers (1989) wrote that many adult students regard 'real education as something remote and separate' and that many adult learners worry about expressing themselves at new academic levels. It is interesting to note that, in research carried out on adult learners in the 1970s, many found higher education rather ordinary once they started their course (Smithers & Griffin, 1986). This could mean one of two things – either those particular students already possessed the ability to cope with the academic level of university and to write at 'degree level' (whatever that means) or they had unreal expectations of higher education.

At the start of any course, it is important to realise that existing knowledge is very important to help as a foundation upon which to build. No one will expect you to 'wipe the slate clean' and start again. Lovell (1980) noted that: 'the more the learner's past experience can be drawn upon . . . (the more that it will) . . . enable him to analyse and organise new information'.

All too easily a student can dismiss his or her previous experience as being irrelevant to formal educational settings. However, I would argue that much learning does occur from experience and it is the ability to apply this learning to new situations that is important. For many students, the process of analysing *why* things happen is the new skill that has to be learnt.

All adult students have undergone many types of educational experiences and this may well lessen or increase the feelings of anxiety as another course is undertaken, depending on those experiences. If previous education or training was not a positive experience, the transition into higher education may well be a major challenge, especially when added to uncertainties about the expectations of the course. In fact, your expectations of higher education may be similar to the following

author who reported that: 'Many believe that all forms of post-compulsory education are formal, inflexible and examination-orientated, and that participants will be judged on their ability to meet certain standards. This perception undoubtedly has a powerful deterrent effect' (McGivney, 1993).

This supports a feeling that I have had for some time that some educational courses should carry a government health warning! Higher education does not have to be like this. If students are given support and guidance from the start of a course about its nature and the work that will be set, then this will enable confidence-building and the opportunity to meet the standards mentioned in the quotation above. This is rather like giving 'signposts' so that the student knows where he or she is going.

Another aspect that students find daunting is that, contrary to being taught all the facts about a subject, the approach found within higher education is that 'complete knowledge' will not be given about a topic, but relevant issues will be raised which the student will be expected to follow up. However, this approach may leave feelings of uncertainty at first as students may wonder what they should know about a subject and, if no guidance is given at all by academic staff, self-confidence may diminish. However, by giving students guidance to enable them to discover how to determine what may be important about a topic, self-confidence should grow as a student progresses through a course. This implies that students will be shown how to learn, not what to learn. Many students will find that there are topics that they are particularly familiar with and others they are meeting for the first time, hopefully creating a balance between existing and new knowledge.

The Findings of the Research on Studying Abilities

A research project on diploma level students was undertaken within a department of nursing in the Spring of 1993. The sample included 169 post-registration nursing students who were asked to complete an anonymous questionnaire. A response rate of 69 per cent (n=117) was achieved. The students were asked to describe their feelings about their learning abilities at the start of their course, by agreeing or disagreeing with the statement: 'some people may feel uncertain

of their studying abilities at the start of their course'. One hundred and two agreed with the statement. They were then asked to describe why they felt this way, and five categories emerged from the data which are consistent with findings from other studies carried out on adult learners.

Academic Level of the Course

The first category to emerge was the uncertainty about the academic level of the course, as well as the amount of work that would have to be completed by the students. Comments such as: 'I questioned my ability to complete the written assignments to a high enough standard' and 'with the amount of course-work given, I wondered if I would be able to do it all in the allocated time' were typical of the responses in this category.

Apprehension

The second category identified the apprehension that students felt about their ability to complete the course. A range of comments were made about their perceived lack of personal knowledge, previous educational experience, as well as the uncertainty of what was going to be expected of them on the course. The comment by one student that he felt 'sceptical of his own ability to complete the course' was representative of the comments made in this category.

Time Lapse since Previous Study

The time lapse since previous study and the links between age and studying ability was the theme of the third category. Within this respondent group the time scale referred to was anywhere between 4 and 30 years! Students referred to the changing nature of education since their training and the fact that they felt they had lost the ability to study effectively. Age and the ability to study was mentioned by many students, with one student saying he felt that he had 'more grey hair than grey matter'!

For some students, their lack of recent studying experience made them feel vulnerable in comparison to other younger students, and it is interesting to note that no one recognised the many years of informal learning as being a foundation upon which to build their knowledge.

Organisational Factors

Fourthly, the complex arrangements that many mature students have to contend with were addressed – this should be more appropriately called the 'how to juggle category'. Many students expressed concern at how they would cope with the combination of work, domestic life and studying at the same time.

Level of confidence

Some students felt quite confident about their own abilities showing that it is not necessary to feel uncertain! The main reason for having this confidence was the recent completion of a course.

Discussion

As mentioned earlier, these findings are consistent with other work carried out on adults in higher educational settings. Thyer & Bazeley (1993) comment that the primary concern for many students will be about the amount and type of academic work that has to be completed. By giving students guidance on what to expect, academic staff can allay many of these fears.

Research carried out at the Open University by Beaty & Morgan (1992) on students over the duration of their degree courses noted the lack of confidence in the students at the start of their course, (as shown in this study) being replaced by a gradual increase in self-belief as students grew more familiar with 'the system'. Interestingly, it was noted that the application process itself was stressful for some of the students. This apprehension can again be reduced by academic staff who are approachable and accessible during the application phase of a course.

The length of time since undertaking education and the ability of older students to complete an academic course has been looked at in studies carried out in Canada (Powell et al, 1990) which found that age and a lack of entry qualifications were insignificant in predicting success. Dille & Mezack (1991) also reported that the older the student was, the more likely he or she was to succeed. Rogers (1989) points out that many adult students have the belief that intellectual ability declines with age and that this belief can cause problems in the older student. However, the student's motivation to succeed can overcome these feelings. With regard to the length of time since studying, it

has been suggested in some studies that recent academic experience enhances success (Bernt & Bugbee, 1993); however, I would argue that this is probably because those students with recent experience have the skills of learning to hand (rather than having to dig into the grey matter to find those skills!). As found in the present study, those students who had recent academic experience felt more confident about their studying abilities.

Any educational course requires a lot of self-discipline within a student who may have to cope with work, home and study at the same time, and this was mentioned in the fourth category in the study. A University of Calgary paper (1993) refers to people in this situation as being 'multiple role individuals'. The study carried out by Powell et al (1990) suggested that study habits and the need for support were significant in predicting academic success. The recognition of the complexities of student's lives, the anticipation of potential problem areas and provision of academic support by a personal tutor may help to allay such problems.

Conclusion

This article has aimed to give an insight into the issues that adults returning to study have expressed concern when coming into the world of higher education for the first time. An attempt has been made to show that, while undertaking an educational course should be a challenging experience, it should not fill any student entirely with fear and trepidation. It may be reassuring for students to know that

other students who have gone on to successfully complete an academic course have expressed similar feelings at the start of their studies. It has also been shown that academic staff have a role in orientating and supporting students in the world of higher education.

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