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Students combining work, family and study roles

**Title: Combining and managing work-family-study roles and perceptions  
of institutional support**

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**Abstract:**

Students registering for distance education degree-level study frequently cite flexibility as a factor influencing their choice for this mode of study, but little is known about how students manage simultaneous, and/or potentially conflicting roles. This study used a self-report open-ended online survey, completed by 348 tertiary-level third/final year undergraduate distance students in the United Kingdom. Respondents were asked how they managed to combine roles and their perceptions of university support. After a thematic analysis, three main themes were identified: ‘building rituals and habits for learning’, ‘navigating online environments and contexts for learning’, and ‘responding to the pressures and problems that hindered their learning’. Students expressed a desire for more proactive support from tutors. From the university, students wanted realistic and practical guidance and planning tools to prepare themselves and others (such as their employers and family) for the likely practical requirements of distance study when combining multiple roles.

**Key words:** work-family; adult learning; online education; mental health; student support

## **Introduction**

In distance education, students are physically separate from their tutors and institutions, and study through correspondence tuition or online learning (Wang, Shannon & Ross, 2013). Students registering for distance education at degree-level frequently cite flexibility and accessibility as factors that influence their choice for this mode of study, as distance education allows them to manage their work and other pre-existing commitments (Ashton & Elliot, 2007; Lane 2012; Jaggars, 2014). Meijs, Neroni, Gijssels, Leontjevas, Kirschner and de Groot (2019) report that distance students are often older, with existing job and family responsibilities, compared with traditional campus-based students.

Distance education proffers important benefits, but a central concern to providers is student attrition. Distance education institutions are thought to have roughly one quarter the graduation rates of campus-based universities and a better understanding of the ‘distance education deficit’ is needed (Simpson, 2013, p.105). It is important to consider how family and work demands play a role in course attrition for distance students. Hart’s (2012) review of research on the student factors contributing to persistence in online courses, identified ‘non-academic issues’ (p.38), such as work and family commitments as a key barrier. Furthermore, Stoessel et al.’s (2015) statistical analysis of graduates and dropouts in distance education programmes at a German university found students’ paid employment significantly increased the likelihood of them dropping out. However, a more recent systematic review of predictors in higher online education (Delnoij, Dirkx, Janssen, & Martens, 2020), suggests the relationship between employment and non-completion is likely to be complex with some studies suggesting that employment, particularly when this is part-time, can actually be beneficial (e.g. Riggert, Boyle & Petrosko 2006). The relationship between family

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commitments and study are also likely to be complex. For example, Stoessel et al.'s (2015) analysis identified students who were parents as being less likely to drop-out. In contrast, qualitative work conducted among online nursing students demonstrated the theme of families getting 'the short end of the stick' (p.7) was discussed as a major reason for a student's withdrawal (Perry, Bowman, Care & Edwards, 2008). Woodley (2004) has outlined the need to explore the complex and interactional nature of how students' work and family roles influence their studies and this might help illuminate the issue of student course attrition (Simpson, 2013) and subsequently lead to better supports for these students.

Li and Wong's (2019) review of 108 studies on factors that influence student persistence in courses at Open Universities globally concluded that the influence of students' work and familial commitments remains under-researched in comparison to student and institutional factors. Therefore, the present study uses an open-ended survey employing qualitative methods to explore how third-year distance education students manage their work and family roles in conjunction with their university studies, and their perceptions about how and whether their university has adequately supported them.

### ***Literature review***

In the work-family literature, role conflict and role facilitation have offered a theoretical lens linking the work-family interface with organisational, family and individual outcomes (Greenhaus and Beutell 1985; Sieber 1974; Stephens, Franks, and Atienza 1997; Wayne, Grzywacz, Carlson, & Kacmar, 2007). This lens can also be used to explore students' experience of the work-family-study interface and outcomes such as course persistence. Role conflict describes the challenges that arise when the time taken or behaviours associated with one role may make the fulfilment of another role more difficult (Greenhaus and Beutell 1985). For example, time working on a person's studies, may take time away from a family

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role or require a reduction in hours employed in paid work. On the other hand, role facilitation relates to the positive effects in which some aspects of one role may actually assist or enhance performance in another role (e.g. Wayne et al., 2007). For example, time management skills learnt in the workplace may facilitate better organisation and study planning as a student. Therefore, enquiry into students' perceptions of role conflict and facilitation represents a way in which students' experiences of study alongside their family and work roles can be better understood.

Outcomes for distance education students, such as academic achievement (Broadbent & Poon, 2015), have also been associated with self-regulated learning (SRL). SRL, as defined by Zimmerman and Schunk (2001), refers to the process in which students actively manage their learning through metacognitive, motivational and behavioural processes, and therefore SRL can also provide insights into how students manage their studies. Dembo, Junge and Lynch (2006) list the six dimensions of SRL as motive (their why for learning), methods (how they learn), time, physical environment (where they study), social environment (with whom they learn) and evaluation of their performance. Whilst the flexibility offered by distance education is cited as a motivation for those with work and family commitments to engage with this mode of study, this engagement also requires students to be more independent in their learning (Wang et al. 2013) and students' work and family role factors may have an impact on their SRL.

Students' learning in the distance education environment can also be understood in terms of the type of interaction. Moore (1989) has outlined the key essential interactional features of distance learning to include learner-instructor interaction with teachers, learner-content with the materials, learner-learner with other students, and Hillman, Wills and Gunawardena (1994) posit a fourth type, learner-interface (for example, the technological medium). Students' work and family commitments may influence how they actively manage

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their learning and their interaction with the different dimensions of the distance education experience. For example, Bozkurt, Koutropoulos, Singh and Honeychurch (2020) have shown that external factors such time, work commitments and family commitments play a role in why distance students may adopt more peripheral learning roles in the online environment such as ‘lurking’ behaviours. Meijs et al. (2019) also found that distance students reported less reliance on contact with other learners compared to traditional campus-based students. This may indicate less reliance on learner-to-learner interactions due to the time demands from their other life roles and supports the argument that distance students’ perceptions and expectations of their learning environment may differ, in line with their working and family role demands. If students choose to remain on the periphery to accommodate their life demands, effective learning spaces need to be designed with this in mind, to ensure these students are enabled with appropriate learning opportunities. As such, the key features of effective distance learning environments need to be considered from the vantage point of these students who are juggling work, family and study roles. This may include consideration of Dembo et al.’s (2006) six dimensions of self-regulated learning for these distance learning students.

It is also pertinent to consider the transactional distance from the perspectives of working students or those with family responsibilities. Transactional distance is akin to a type of pedagogical or psychological distance because physical distance in study “leads to a communications gap, a psychological space of potential misunderstandings between the behaviors of instructors and those of the learners” (Moore and Kearsley, 1996, p. 200). In distance education, the transactional distance is posited to be a function of both dialogue and structure (Moore, 1990; Moore & Kearsley, 1996). Greater communication with teachers or instructors is considered high dialogue and reduces the transactional distance (Moore, 1993). Conversely, greater structure provided by instructors means that students are less in control of



their own learning and this can increase transactional distance. Wozniak and McEldowney (2015) found distance students with existing work and family demands, may have different expectations regarding transactional distance due to factors such as their limited time commitments for studying. Wozniak and McEldowney's (2015) in-depth case study of five distance nursing students, who were also juggling work and family demands, found students needed time to adjust to the transactional distance of study, and needed to carefully manage the transition to becoming self-regulated learners. They concluded that universities needed to raise awareness of the importance of self-regulation to support learners' autonomy and improve course retention and persistence for distance students who have work and family commitments.

The present research was conducted with undergraduate students at a large distance education university in the United Kingdom (UK) and focused on how students successfully combine and manage their distance learning alongside any family and work roles and responsibilities. This study examined third year/final stage undergraduate students' perspectives given that they have considerable experience of university study and can reflect in greater depth upon their experiences. The findings aim to inform online and distance education providers about the requirements and preferences of students who typically have competing family and/or work commitments. The movement towards lifelong learning will render some of the findings also relevant to traditional higher education institutions, who are extending their academic offerings to include greater distance-based online courses, in conjunction with their traditional degrees (Smith 2016).

The study's research objectives were:

- To determine how students manage work, study and family roles during their time at university;

- To ascertain how supportive the university has been in assisting them in managing their work-study-family roles; and,
- To gauge how best universities can improve their support systems for distance education students in the future.

## **Methods**

### ***Methodology***

The present study was a qualitative investigation into how distance students perceive, manage and combine their work, family and study roles and their perceptions of their institutional support for combining multiple life roles. The present study used open-ended questions via an online self-report survey which enabled the collection of students' views in written free text responses in their own words and in their own time. Text data, derived through open-ended survey questions, can meet the criteria for qualitative research enquiry when the survey questions are purposely selected to address a priori research aims and where the central focus of the questions is clear (LaDonna, Taylor & Lingard, 2018). Whilst the richness of the data is often less than interview or focus group methods, the breadth of inquiry can yield meaningful insights and inspire new avenues for research (LaDonna et al., 2018). The full online survey took approximately 15 minutes to complete and was administered using Jisc Online Surveys (JISC, 2020), but students could take as long as they needed to complete the survey.

The present study was situated in a larger mixed methods project which was designed to address two wider aims using a single self-report online survey, to capture both quantitative and qualitative data. In the full online survey, students were asked demographic background questions (marital status, parent status, carer status). They also completed established

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measures on work and family conflict and facilitation and a non-clinical standardised self-reported assessment of mental distress designed for the general population (The Depression, Anxiety and Stress Scale - 21 Items/DASS-21; Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995) in order to obtain the quantitative data for the project. Students' age, ethnicity data and course registration data were accessed from institutional records. The quantitative research component allowed the production of a regression modelling analysis of student mental distress according to discrete variables such as working status and parenting status. These results are outside the scope of the present study but are reported in Waterhouse, Samra and Lucassen (2020). The present study focuses on the qualitative data generated from the four open-ended questions in the online survey about managing the work-family-study interfaces. These questions were informed by the literature and comprised of the following:

- Have you got any particular strategies that help you to combine your work responsibilities with studying?
- Have you got any particular strategies that help you to combine your family life with studying?
- What sources of support (e.g. tutors, student support team) or university resources (e.g. advice on university student home and general help pages), if any, have you drawn upon whilst studying at [the university]? And how effective did you find these resources/or sources of support?
- Do you have any suggestions for how [the university] could improve support to students, particularly with helping them combine their commitments (e.g. personal and professional) with their studies?

The questionnaire was piloted in development by five individuals including current students at the university, and the survey was refined based on the feedback they provided to enhance question comprehension. The study received ethical approval from The Open

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University's Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC/3165/X). After a favourable opinion from the ethics committee a weblink was sent via email, with an information page included as the first landing page. This was followed by a request for consent and all participants provided their consent before taking part in this study.

### ***Sample and recruitment***

A sample of 1,436 students from third/final year modules in health or education at the University's School of Health, Wellbeing and Social Care and the School of Education, Childhood, Youth and Sport were invited to complete the survey in April 2019 over a three-week period. The response rate was 24% (n=348). Respondents were aged from 20 to 88 years old (mean age = 36.9 years) and broadly reflective of the gender make-up of the students in the two schools; 306 were female (87.9%) and 42 were male (12.1%). Key socio-demographic and background data is presented in Table 1.

Table 1 about here

### ***Analysis***

The survey data were anonymised, and all responses were exported into NVivo 11. Data were then analysed using thematic analysis following the approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). All data from all questions was transferred to a single project dataset in NVivo. All data, irrespective of which question it answered, was initially labelled with surface-level data coding by one author (RS) which ensured that themes were not decided a priori, but were inductively coded (Boyatzis, 1998). Basic codes addressing similar phenomena were grouped together in preliminary categories. Categories were shared and

examined by a second author (ML) who analysed the data for clusters to identify working themes (which were to become subthemes). The two authors discussed possible larger themes. The dataset of categories and working themes were then examined again to agree on the main themes. Following this, RS developed an initial thematic framework, into categories, subthemes and themes, which were examined by ML who checked the scope and naming of the themes, subthemes and categories. After discussion, any differences were resolved, and the overall thematic coding framework was agreed on by consensus until both researchers approved the final thematic framework, an approach which is thought to establish better dependability for findings (Nowell, Norris, White, & Moules, 2017). The final framework was then examined and reviewed by the lead researcher for the overall project (PW) and the two data coders (RS & ML) demonstrated to (PW) confirmability that their interpretations and findings were clearly derived from the data (e.g. Nowell, et al. 2017).

## **Results**

Findings were organised into three main themes: (i) building rituals and habits for learning; (ii) navigating online environments and contexts for learning; and (iii) responding to pressures and problems that hinder learning. Table 2 shows the themes, sub-themes and categories.

Table 2 about here

### ***Theme 1: Building rituals and habits for learning***

This theme related to the ways in which students built new habits or routines into their lives to incorporate their student role with their family and/or work roles. They described the psychological, emotional or planning challenges that arose from studying alongside the other demands expected of them.

*Balancing working lives and study*

Many students described having to actively change their work commitments to fit in with their study, such as reducing their hours, going part-time, or using their annual leave for their studies which had trade-offs including economic consequences:

*I have two part-time jobs as I had to quit my full-time job for my... studies. I have very little money and struggle to afford groceries sometimes but do not have the time to get another job or more hours. It is very difficult trying to balance studying and work and the only way I can seem to manage it is so work as little as possible and scrape through on low finances but I am getting good [assignment] results. (Female, age 30-34 years, has co-resident children, engaged in paid work)*

When students reflected on their choices and sacrifices in relation to time spent or income lost, for example, they tended to also consider this positively in terms of how it signalled their own personal values as an individual towards improving their lives through learning which was satisfying for them. Work and learning could complement each other:

*I bring my university reading material to read at lunch and I discuss my studies with my colleagues as a way of consolidating my ideas (Female, aged 25-29, no co-resident children, engaged in paid work)*

Some students felt that the demands of studying were not always understood at work, for example by their employer, and the university could provide better guidance and advice around how to manage these tensions and expectations:

*...possibly some advice on how to speak to our employers and management staff on degree-based work placements so that they understand our study commitments...*

*Many members of staff within my [workplace sponsor] have no idea how much study time is required of us, tutorial commitments, number of assignments (Female, aged 39+, has co-resident children, engaged in paid work)*

#### *Drawing on and from family networks*

This subtheme related to the help, support or understanding that students needed from their families to facilitate them in completing their studies. Some students described how they had to create boundaries with family members to make clear what they needed in order to complete their studies and manage others' expectations of them. This might include negotiating and renegotiating support at times of greater need. For example, they might bargain for family members (such as children) to take on more responsibilities at busy times, especially around assignment deadlines or examinations. A number of students described the need to have conversations with family members about their studies, workload, deadlines and warn them of associated feelings that these pressures might raise, such as feeling overwhelmed at certain times.

Some students tried to spend dedicated and specific quality time with their family to allow them to focus on their studies at other key times in order to mitigate feelings of guilt. Family members might inspire the student to persevere with their studies, and vice versa:

*My eldest son is in University away from home and it has helped us both as he can see that University study is stressful for us both and although our courses and totally different we proof read each others work via email. The anxiety that he has felt has been [alleviated] as he can see that we are both in similar situations although [our]*

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*circumstances and commitments are very different* (Female, 39+, has co-resident children, engaged in paid work)

*Student planning and organising their lives*

Students commonly described timetabling and planning their study schedules. They were clear on the importance of realistic planning which could involve mapping family and work demands and planning in advance for selected family events:

*I plan ahead as the... academic calendar is known when I enroll [sic] on the course, I book leave around [assignment]/Exam dates. I book onto tutorials and plan work and home/life around them where possible. I do this in combination with my daughters timetable – she is doing A levels* (Female, aged 39+, has co-resident children, engaged in paid work)

Some suggested that this planning and organising aspect of studying is so crucial that the university should create and offer better time planning tools. These tools could be individualised to the student and their work and family context and possibly have personalised reminders relating to their studies, which might be sent to them electronically. A commonly described aspect of student planning related to the rigidity versus flexibility of the time and place of study. Students were polarised in relation to the degree of flexibility needed for building effective habits and routines for studying. Many students wrote that they followed set patterns and routines for studying based on their family or work responsibilities, but some described the need to keep a strict separation between their work and study domains to block out distractions. Other students reported that they had to maintain flexible approaches to exploiting the available time to study in various places or spaces, such as by keeping learning materials accessible and close-at-hand:



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*...little but often, 10 minutes before work I can read a few pages and make a few notes. i have everything paper based in a folder so can take with me where ever [sic] I go* (Female, aged 30-34, has co-resident children, not currently engaged in paid work)

## ***Theme 2: Navigating online environments and contexts for learning***

This theme related to the opportunities afforded by distance learning and the practical and psychological frustrations of using online environments for learning.

### *Access and teaching quality*

Students described how learning resources (for example, module materials, readings and online tutorials and forums) worked to facilitate or hinder learning. Students noted that during their studies the university had moved to offering more online tutorial events and some students missed the opportunities made possible from face-to-face events, including talking to their peers, feeling less isolated and getting out of their home or work environment:

*it takes you out of the situation (home life etc) and it's a space to fully focus on university studies. There is no background noise from your family doing what they normally do, or housework niggling at you as you know it needs to get done. There is no home phone ringing or a doorbell that needs to be answered.* (Female, aged 30-34 years, co-resident children, engaged in paid work)

In terms of the increasingly online teaching strategies adopted by the university, students were polarised on the helpfulness of online asynchronous forums, especially considering that the advice and guidance provided online may be contradictory between users, including university tutors. For some, online forums were a useful way to connect to

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other students, and get advice and guidance from them, whereas others found them difficult to keep up with and overwhelming.

Navigating the online virtual learning environment, which could be convenient and easy to use, could also conversely be challenging and stressful as well as potentially isolating. Peer collaboration and group work online was perceived as being hard and stressful due to the unpredictable attendance of others. Students also reported that online tutorials were variable in quality and could be made more effective. Tutorials where tutors read out the information from PowerPoint slides was considered a poor use of students' time. Students typically wanted flexible online offerings, such as the availability of recorded online tutorials after the event. Moreover, students were clear that they needed a return on the investment of their time and effort, so it was worth their while to learn to use, and engage with, online formats and online resources.

#### *Online support and learning communities*

Students often wrote of being satisfied with formal support from tutors answering their specific queries, and many raised the need to have greater interaction and support from their peer community (which was often lacking). Some students wanted to access their peers through synchronous or instant methods such as instant chat, messaging or social media.

### ***Theme 3: Responding to pressures and problems that hinder learning***

In this theme, students described the key challenges that they felt they had to address in order to progress on their courses and in their learning which included dealing with the administrative and procedural aspects of studying at a distance, as well as uncertainty in their relationships and expectations for personal and tutorial support.

*Feeling in the dark and managing the red tape*

Some students described not knowing what to do when they were in need of help or assistance, both in relation to their studies or when coping with personal issues that were affecting their studies. When encountering issues (e.g. personal, mental health-related, financial, family or IT-related), students could find themselves repeatedly describing their problem to many different departments at the university. Students often felt confused, stressed or overwhelmed at having to deal with the university's overly complex administrative or bureaucratic systems which led to problems becoming drawn out:

*Problem logged, no one rings back despite assurances this will happen. Hours on the phone, problem remains, final emails received border on rude. I have given up trying to solve the IT issue and just attempt to work around it...but adds an unnecessary stress.* (Female, aged 39+, no co-resident children, engaged in paid work)

Some students described the need for the university to offer better signposting of help and support that was clearer for students to access when they were in crisis. It is important to note that the university does not assign each student a personal tutor, separate from their academic tutor, nor assigns them any specific pastoral support person throughout their study journey. A number of students identified the lack of pastoral support, and apparent limited skillset of some of the support staff who were expected to assist students who were in a time of crisis:

*It would be useful for students to have a guaranteed pastoral contact who would not necessarily be their tutor. If I had felt confident about sharing my mental health issues I might have been able to avoid my meltdown by having someone to contact and talk through it. I was not in a place where I could respond to the general help facilities that were available and offered and suffered detriment as a result of this. It was not*

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*the support staff's fault; but they did not have the relevant skills to cope with the needs of a student with mental health issues and did not think to refer me to anyone else who might have been able to help.* (Male, aged 39+, no co-resident children, engaged in paid work)

## Keeping up with study

Students described the factors that affected their ability to keep up with their studies. Sometimes the structure of a course could interfere with the overall flexibility expected from distance education, such as when tutorials were timetabled too near a relevant deadline or examination, which then conflicted with notions of studying at your own individual pace. Some students found week-by-week study and the university's general planning guidance, advice and study planning tools unrealistic as they were divorced from the context of the working and family lives of students.

Unforeseen personal and family challenges were identified as a factor in falling behind. In some cases, this problem could happen gradually, and students struggled to identify and ask for help and support early on. These students thought that the university should be more proactive in attempting to help by identifying struggling students and then responding appropriately:

*Perhaps assessing a student's other responsibilities in regards to family and work commitments at the beginning of the course to identify if there is anyone who would benefit from additional support or special circumstances during the course and especially around submission deadlines.* (Female, aged 25-29, has co-resident children, engaged in paid work)

There was a tension in how students should go about resolving problems that might relate to their personal, social or family situation, but go on to affect their academic journey.

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Students found it difficult to identify the appropriate time to seek study support for a personal issue and some considered deadline extensions to be the only source of support they could seek from their tutor.

### *The tutor-student relationship*

This subtheme related to the student's relationship with their tutor, and how this relationship affected their studies. Many students who were dissatisfied described the stresses of dealing with negative, disheartening, or impolite feedback from tutors and the impact it had on them:

*I have found tutors to be very different and give different amounts of support. I have found their feedback very vague and have had some rude/sarcastic emails which have knocked my confidence. Their support/guidance often contradicts each other leaving me confused and demotivated often.* (Female, aged 19-24, no co-resident children, engaged in paid work)

Many students commented on the variability of tutor communication such as differences in the timeliness of the feedback, and in the quantity and quality of feedback between modules. Variations in guidance from one tutor to the next within the same module was particularly stressful and unhelpful for students. Some students reported that tutors only contacted them if the student had contacted them first, and they recommended that the university develop requirements about tutors initiating/getting in touch with students. Sometimes, students described tutors who were unapproachable, unless you were in desperate need or required an extension. It was suggested that getting to know your tutor would be more helpful in 'breaking the ice', so students would feel more comfortable in contacting them over the course of a module. Alternatively, regular 'check-ins' with the student could help develop the student-tutor relationship. Finally, some mention of the contractual (often

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part-time) nature of the tutors' work was described as impractical or ill-suited to the student's requirements:

*Ensure tutors reply to emails. I was told a tutor only replies on Mondays and Tuesdays. Which isn't helpful when if you have a [assignment] due on Friday and have a question after the Tuesday.* (Female, aged 19-24, no co-resident children, engaged in paid work)

Where tutors were helpful, these relationships were pivotal to the student experience in terms of their wellbeing, their motivation and their persistence:

*"However I cannot praise my final year tutors enough. They are both extremely supportive, offer constructive criticism in feedback and are happy to discuss queries further. They keep me up to date with any changes and reminders and always reply to emails promptly. I genuinely think their support has made a difference to my wellbeing in my final year and although I'm still excited to finish my studies, they've made it a lot more bearable"* (Female, aged 25-29, no co-resident children, engaged in paid work)

## **Discussion**

This study lends further support to the idea that family, personal and employment factors affect student learning journeys and study success (Zepke , Leach, and Butler 2011; Lee & Choi, 2011; Li & Wong, 2019). Our findings demonstrate the benefits of viewing distance students' journeys using the lens of role conflict and role facilitation to explore their simultaneous life roles. Our study showed how students may describe greater motivation to learn because it was inspirational to their family members, such as their children, which could explain Stoessel et al.'s (2015) findings that students who are parents are less likely to drop

out of distance education. The importance of students drawing on their family as inspiration for studying also reinforces Dembo et al.'s (2006) work on motivation as one of the six key dimensions of self-regulated learning. Students also provided examples of how studying could facilitate the student's work roles if the course was related to their job which they reported facilitated deeper learning and more positive work experiences, which is an example of role facilitation (Wayne et al. 2007). Our findings highlight the importance of not just considering that students' life roles are interactive and can facilitate their study (as well as provide conflicts). But also, their studying can beneficially affect their other life roles (e.g. Stephens, Franks, and Atienza 1997).

Students did note issues of role conflict. Our findings indicate that students who report being 'time-poor' wanted more tools and guidance from distance universities, that developed both their confidence and autonomy in studying, at the same time as managing their other life roles. In the context of Dembo et al.'s (2006) earlier work on self-regulated learning, our study reinforced the importance of careful time management and study planning. In order that students are able to create the physical environment they require so that they are able to focus on their studies. Students also reported the need to create boundaries with their family, which involved negotiating support in an ongoing manner with their family so that they could concentrate on their studies. These findings echo the work of Wozniak and McEldowney (2015) who concluded that universities need to raise awareness of the importance of learner autonomy in distance education for busy students. The students in our study desired a proactive response from the university to identifying and signalling challenges to them in advance of anticipated student milestones. In response to this universities could develop guidance and offer students additional support in managing common challenges or milestones, as well as assistance related to work-family conflict (e.g. Kember, 1999), such as how to negotiate difficult conversations with employers or family

members in order to gather the support needed. This would ultimately facilitate learner autonomy (Moore, 1993) and also promote self-regulated learning (Dembo et al., 2006).

Our findings corroborate Park and Choi's (2009) conclusions on the importance of organisational support to distance students, including universities committing time or resources to support them. We also recommend that distance education providers use their institutional data to flag particular life roles, commonly associated with certain demands (e.g. parenting), to identify where tools and guidance are likely to be useful and proactively contacting particular student groups in line with this. For example, working students and/or students who are parents of younger children indicated that they struggled with managing their time or reported stress stemming from their family and work. The needs of these students may differ again from older adult students, including those who are in retirement or have caring responsibilities for their spouse.

The present study demonstrated that students found navigating online environments as both useful and convenient, but also stressful and confusing at times, such as indicated by their feedback about asynchronous online forums. Students expected a return of investment on their time and effort in learning to use the university's online systems and learning environments, or the risk is they can disengage from them (e.g. by not attending scheduled online tutorials). This brings to mind the learner-interface aspects of their learning environment (Hillman, Wills and Gunawardena, 1994) and suggests that students who are working, have family responsibilities or feel 'time-poor' may have different needs from their learner-interface interactions to support their study, such as greater simplicity and ease of use of university systems and learning environments. These findings potentially have implications for all universities, distance and traditional, due to the movement towards online learning throughout the tertiary sector (Smith, 2016). Students also commented on the importance of the learner-instructor interaction on their learning (e.g. Moore, 1989). Some



students felt their tutors were unapproachable and reported vulnerabilities relating to their communications (Moore, 1990; Moore, 1993; Moore & Kearsley, 1996) in which they felt their confidence was undermined by their tutor's feedback. Such feedback might increase perceptions of the transactional distance for these students as it left some disheartened and demotivated, and may have negatively contributed to the performance evaluation dimension of their self-regulated learning (Dembo et al., 2006).

In the present study, students described some of their problems and pressures that hindered learning related to the institution and its bureaucracy which did not stem from the students' personal or work context but may compound their stress from these life roles. Of particular concern is how navigating a complex university and its systems may increase the transactional distance for students, allowing for communications gap to increase and may raise new problems that prevent course completion or persistence (Moore and Kearsley, 1996). Particularly pertinent is that in the present study vulnerable students in crisis noted the difficulties they had in resolving complex problems with many different departments or functions of the institution which compounded their problems. Therefore distance education institutions need to consider how to prioritise clear and simple communication and messages to reduce the transactional distance when students who are juggling work and family roles report that they need help or are in crisis.

Reducing the transactional distance for students could involve a single point of contact for pastoral and administrative needs. For example, in the present university, the role of the 'tutor-counsellor' (Sewart, 1980) has been abandoned in favour of a different tutor for each individual module studied for its duration. The tutor-counsellor role was deliberately designed for distance universities where the student is remote from the institution and is based on the concept of continuity of concern (Sewart, 1980). Each tutor-counsellor would be assigned 30-40 distance students and support them from initial registration to graduation

(Sewart, 1980). Tutor-counsellors could support students with issues relating to their academic and non-academic spheres as the tutor-counsellor would combine their institutional knowledge of a complex university and its processes, with their knowledge of the student (Sewart, 1980). Our findings demonstrated that students reported limited time and opportunity to make contact and establish relationships with tutors and demonstrated uncertainty about whether they can approach tutors for personal and pastoral purposes. Therefore, it could be argued that the abandonment of the tutor-counsellor may have increased feelings of transactional distance for students. Forty years ago, Sewart (1980) formulated the tutor-counsellor role, ironically at the same university as the setting for the present study, to individualise the student journey in which distance education universities need to be “critically aware of the potential depersonalization of the individual student and the possible subordination of the real needs of students to the bureaucratic requirements of the institution” (p. 171). As well as helping them cope, recent research has demonstrated that student support interventions in distance education reduce attrition, and increased both retention and academic success (Netanda, Mamabolo, and Themane 2019).

### ***Strengths and limitations***

A key strength of the present study was the large number of responses to open-ended questions that were collected and analysed. However, this study is based on an online self-report survey which has a number of noted weaknesses. These include how demographic factors can cause response pattern distortions or bias, socially desirable responding or taking shortcuts when responding (‘sacrificing’) which could bias the responses to the survey received (Akbulut, 2014). As a single time-point cross-sectional survey, students who completed the survey may feel differently and report experiences differently at other points in time, which is another limitation of the present work. However, the present study sampled final year students in order to allow students to be able to reflect, on balance, their years of

distance study experience to answer the questions. The sample is primarily comprised of mature females who are white, hence the lack of diversity is a limitation of this work, but reflects the course profiles of participants. Of the participants in the present study, 51 of the participants (14.7%) were non-white. There were no statistical differences in whether students were more or less likely to respond to the survey based on their white or non-white status, which is a strength of the study. However, the findings are therefore limited in their generalisability to other settings where courses have greater student gender and ethnic diversity.

### **Conclusion and recommendations**

The findings of this study demonstrate how students interactively combine their multiple roles to successfully pursue distance education. Students can benefit from positive spill-over from their study role into their family and work roles, as well as role conflict. The key areas of support they recommended focused on the university's explicit acknowledgment of their context by offering realistic guidance and planning tools that students can personalise to manage their multiple roles in conjunction with study. We therefore recommend distance institutions develop and test tools and guidance that allow these students to better plan and organise their time and physical environmental needs to support self-regulated learning in the context of their busy family and working lives. We also propose that future directions for research should focus on how students with multiple other life roles and demands might be better supported through the key features of the learning environment. For example, whether learner expectations and preferences differ in relation to their learner-to-learner, learner-to-instructor, learner-content, and learner-interface interactions (Moore, 1993; Hillman, Wills and Gunawardena, 1994) as a function of feeling 'time-poor' due to working and family life roles, and how to better address these needs. Distance universities should also seek to reflect

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on how they play a role in isolating and psychologically distancing these students through complex or bureaucratic procedures and policies.

## **Data**

The data that support this study are not made widely available due to issues of confidentiality and anonymity in line with General Data Protection Regulation and the Institution's Human Research Ethics Committee who decided that students may be identifiable from transcripts and the transcripts should remain within research team oversight.

## **Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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