

The Female Distance Learner: Motivation, Persistence and Success in Pre-Degree English Courses

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Women distance educators and learners at the University of the South Pacific face the same basic problem: too much to do and too little time to do it well. This is true in my own case as a distance educator. Unlike most other tertiary institutions, USP does not recruit separate staff for its Campus and Extension teaching operations but requires the same staff to teach in both modes. Thus, since 1979, while teaching English courses to students on our Laucala Campus in Suva, I have also been a tutor/marker of Extension English courses for our regional students whose assignments and examination scripts are sent to Suva from their countries of origin for evaluation. In addition, I have co-ordinated our Extension English programme; I write and revise Extension English courses to parallel courses taught on campus; and I conduct Extension tutorials through our satellite network and/or make short visits to our distant learners in their own countries. This dual teaching role is both a bane and a blessing, accounting for most of the frustrations and the fulfillments I experience in my job.

The woman distance learner seems to hold the same sort of love/hate attitude towards her education in this mode. I arrived at this conclusion, and others, through a survey by questionnaire/interview of women in five USP countries who enrolled in the four pre-degree English courses offered for credit in Semester I, 1986. I chose countries with the highest enrolments in these courses: Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, Fiji, Western Samoa and Tonga. The four courses were LLP11 — Preliminary English A; LLP12 — Preliminary English B; LLF11 — Communications and Study Skills I; LLF01 — Introduction to English Literature. The first two courses are roughly equivalent to English courses offered in the final year of secondary school in the region; the last two courses are equivalent to the Foundation English courses taken on campus by USP students before they begin degree studies.

Table 1

Enrolment figures for four pre-degree English courses Semester 1, 1986

Country	Female	Male
Solomon Islands	5	84
Vanuatu	32	48
Fiji	27	55
Western Samoa	19	49
Tonga	25	61
Total	108	297

Note: From these figures it is clear that Pacific women are not highly represented (27%) in distance education, contrary to the situation in other parts of the world. Extension Studies enrolment statistics for Semester 2, 1985 (50 courses) show a total of 35% for female enrolment.

The questionnaire

A 40-question questionnaire was sent to each of the 108 women who enrolled in the four courses. 16 women were interviewed. The 40 questions were phrased in simple English because most USP students know English as a second or third language and not as their mother tongue. The questionnaire was divided into four sections: Background Information (7 questions); Reading and Learning (9 questions); Tutoring (5 questions); Other Factors Affecting Your Extension Study (19 questions).

Results

From the sample of 108 students, 46 (43%) responses were received. Taped interviews were conducted with 16 of these 46 respondents and took the form of the respondents answering the questions and elaborating on some of them.

Background information: About two thirds of respondents lived in urban areas while one third lived in rural areas; two thirds were aged from 15-30 while one third was aged from 31-40. Nearly all (98%) had completed primary school and 85% had completed secondary school.

The most popular course was LLFII Communications and Study Skills

(59%), followed by LLP11 Preliminary English A (28%). Most respondents enrolled to continue their education (41%), while 39% enrolled to be better in their jobs.

Reading and Learning: Just over half (56%) the respondents said they found English an easy language to read and write and finished all the course assignments. Just under three-quarters (71%) sat the final examination.

Tutoring: Only a quarter (26%) of the respondents said they never needed to seek help with their assignments. Just over one third (39%) said they always got the help they needed from their tutor (either face-to-face or by written comment).

Other factors affecting your extension study: Nearly three quarters (71%) of the respondents were in full-time employment. 82% did the work for the course at home and nearly all (92%) had enough room and light to work in. Just over two thirds (67%) of the respondents were unmarried but had home duties which took time away from their studies. Married respondents all had family duties that took time away from their studies. Both married and unmarried respondents on the whole had community/social interests and responsibilities which reduced their study time. Only 60% of the married respondents had home help from their husbands to free them for their course work.

Table 2
Official course results for the four pre-degree English courses, Semester I, 1986 (women only)

Country	No. Enrolled	Pass	Fail
Solomon Islands	5	1	4
Vanuatu	32	7	25
Fiji	27	8	9
Western Samoa	19	11	8
Tonga	25	13	12
Total	108 (100%)	50 (46%)	58 (54%)

Note: The Vanuatu figures include 16 enrolments from Francophone New Caledonian Kanaks attempting to further their education outside their French colonial system. For various reasons, these students were unable to submit most of their coursework or to take the examinations for their courses. They did not return questionnaires.

Table 3 looks at course results in terms of residence of respondents. Urban students clearly have the advantage over rural students because they have easier access to the resources of the USP Extension Centre in their country. At the urban Centre, they may attend tutorials with local tutors and visiting Fiji-based tutors. They may take part in satellite tutorials with tutors based at the Laucala Campus in Suva. They may also use the USP Centre library resources.

Rural students, by contrast, are lucky if they can find a good secondary school library in their area or a fellow student to work with on an Extension Course. On the rare occasions when rural areas are visited by local or Fiji-based course tutors, rural students may get help from the tutorials offered during these short visits.

The *Don't Know* column in Table 3 refers to those respondents who did not know whether they had passed or failed the course at the time of response (mid-semester 2, 1986). There are several reasons for this lack of information: sometimes official results are withheld from students because they have failed to pay all course fees; sometimes there are delays in processing results because examination scripts take time to reach tutors/markers in Fiji. No matter how valid the reasons, these delays in receiving course results have negative effects on Extension students.

Table 3
Course Results of Questionnaire Respondents, Semester 1, 1986

Residential	No. Enrolled	Passed	Failed	Don't Know
Urban	30	16	4	10
Rural	16	4	6	6
Total	46	20	10	16

Conclusion

The very diverse nature of the USP distance education system argues against quick and easy conclusions. However, this survey indicates some factors that seem to apply beyond the English pre-degree courses and their distance learners. While enrolment figures for women are generally

considerably lower than those for men, the figures for Vanuatu and Solomon Islands are more extreme than those for Tonga and Western Samoa, with Fiji falling somewhere between the two. Rural distance learners, particularly on outer islands, are much more disadvantaged than their urban sisters. Unmarried as well as married women have considerable family and community duties and responsibilities that take time from their personal pursuits. Though there are individual instances of husbands supporting their wives in their educational endeavours, Pacific cultures generally put male interests and power first. Solomon Islands' poet, Jully Sipolo, sums it all up (check the enrolment figures for her country!):

A Man's World

My brother can sit on the table
I mustn't
He can say what he likes whenever he likes
I must keep quiet
He can order me around like a slave
I must not back-chat
He gives me his dirty clothes to wash
I wish he could wash mine!
If he sits on the front steps
I must go round the back door
If the house is full
I must crawl on my hands and knees
I must walk behind him not in front
Watch my speech when he is in the house
Don't say 'face' but say 'front'
Not 'teeth' but 'stone'
Carry out my love affairs behind his back
Custom allows him to thrash both of us if caught
But he can carry on in front of me
That's his privilege
I must pay compensation
If I'm to get married
Or pregnant without a hubby
A brother can make a living out of his sisters!

Add to her voice these others on motivation, persistence and success and we get a better idea of the South Pacific Island distance learner as a woman and as a person:

"... If you want to get more out of life, you need education." (Samoa)

"It's a good way for working people to get an education." (Samoa)
 "I'd like to achieve a higher level of education... which would mean more income for a big family." (Tonga)
 "In our culture girls have their jobs and boys have theirs..." (rural Samoa)
 "Samoan men don't help with housework."
 "In order to maintain the peace in our relationship I have to get his agreement for everything I do." (Tonga)
 "He said I was too old to learn..." (Samoa)
 "One assignment I did in bed at 2.00 a.m.!" (Fiji)
 "I resigned from all committees, organisations etc. because of problems at home... that almost succeeded in breaking up our marriage. I was always reminded that the home and family came first — sometimes I was told I was just wasting my time." (Indo-Fijian)
 "It would have been very, very helpful if we'd had a tutor... What about us in the smaller islands?" (rural Vanuatu)
 "It was the tightness of life... commitments I have in the family, church and community, work. Also my personal life — looking for a husband!" (rural Samoa)
 "It is good; it restores my confidence." (Tonga)
 "I feel like a big person internally." (Tonga)
 "Great. I was surprised and shocked to see my name in the paper." (Fiji)
 "I feel braver to take more courses." (Fiji)
 "Made me feel good. I knew that I could take university courses and pass them, contrary to what some people said." (Indo-Fijian)

And finally,

"It stimulates and refreshes my mind and is very helpful with my work. It helps me to help my children with their English homework. I feel and believe that to educate a woman is to educate a family." (rural Fiji)