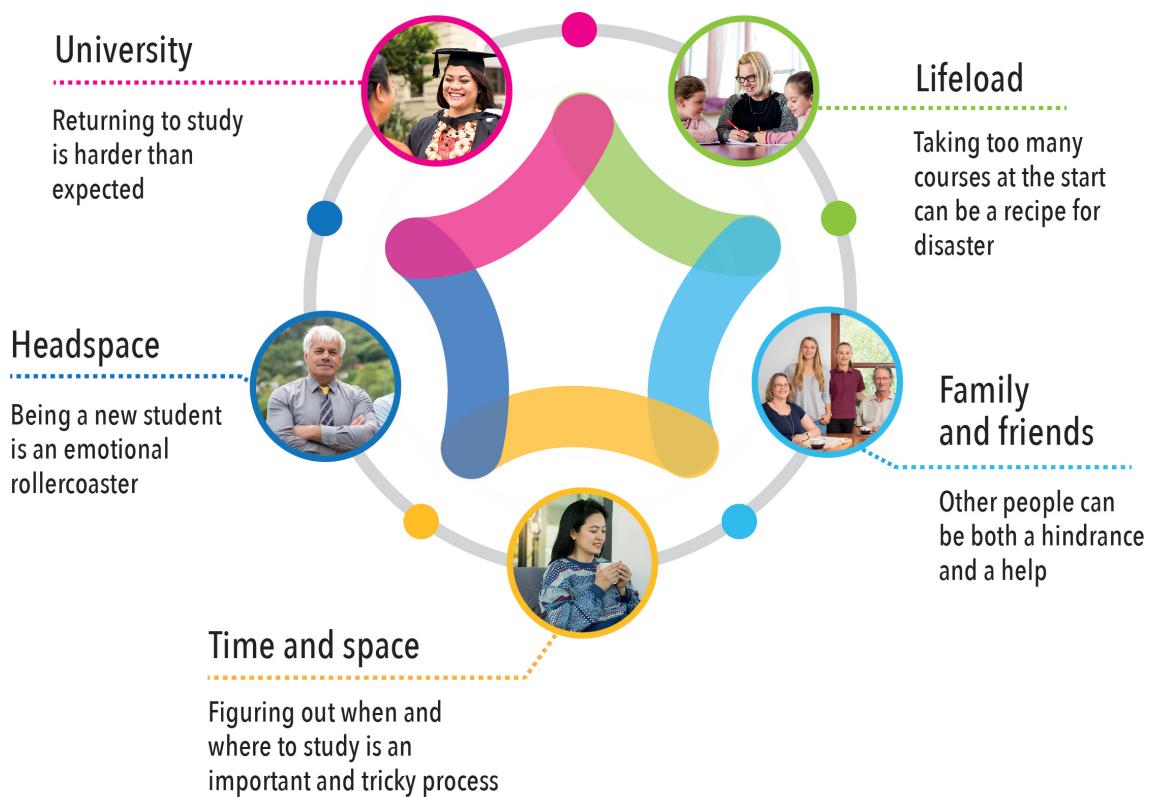


# Distance student stories

Nineteen students' experiences in their first semester at university



## The first semester of distance study is different for everyone.

These are the stories of 19 mature-aged (over the age of 25) students in their first semester as distance students at university. The students and their families were interviewed before the semester started and again after it had finished. The students also kept weekly video diaries talking about their student life.

It is impossible to detail the breadth and depth of each unique experience but these stories capture the essence of each student's semester: where they started from, their strengths and challenges, and what they gained from the experience. Starting university is a difficult transition: the students all had to develop university skills, manage their lifeload, find time and space to study, work alongside their family, and manage their own emotions and motivations.

## Alfie

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*Alfie: My family is just as important as my studies, but in saying that, my studies are just as important as well. So I will need to balance the both of them.*

Alfie was 33 years old, married to Robert with two children, Jade aged 13 and Richie aged three. They lived in a rented home and both adults were on welfare benefits although Alfie also had casual part time work in a local kitchen. Alfie described herself as a good student until college when she got in with the wrong crowd. She was expelled the following year and since then had done a number of short training courses such as tourism and customer service. Alfie had a history of addiction problems and she was working towards a Bachelor of Social Work so she could help other people in similar situations. She found the online enrolment process frustrating and was surprised when she was accepted by the university. Staff contacted Alfie and advised her on what courses to take. She was enrolled as a full time student doing four courses.

Alfie planned to study while the children were at school and kōhanga (Māori language preschool) and in her breaks at work. She asked to have her work shifts limited to give her more time. At the time of the interview, two weeks prior to the start of the semester, she had received all the course materials, and was initially quite daunted by the amount of reading and the "long technical words". She was working hard to understand and felt she was making progress. She had made a start on one assignment and was very excited by it. Life was challenging from the start: Finances meant she had no internet at home, her son was having bad asthma attacks, and she was scheduled for long hours at work. She was initially fitting in study but by week three was starting to slip. She found the course content confusing, and she was exhausted and stressed. The family's health was not good with Robert needing scans and Alfie having emergency surgery to extract four teeth. She missed some assessment deadlines. By week six, she decided she had taken on too much and was planning to ring the university to find out what her options were for reducing her workload. She ended the semester with DNC grades on all courses and was not available for a follow up interview.

*Alfie: Very very full on, draining, tiring... I haven't had a chance to do any studying, um, part and parcel, work but just a lot of other things on my mind. Robert is going in for a procedure on Monday, so that's playing havoc with me at the moment... Just very drained.*

## Bella

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Bella: *If the lecturer is good and I'm very clear of what, of what I have to learn, I can be very good at it. Otherwise not so, but if the paper requires a lot of writing, like essays, I'm, I might not be that good at it.*

Bella was a 39-year-old Malaysian Chinese. She came to New Zealand with her husband, Li, and daughter, Pippa, aged 11. She had been a stay at home mother for the past six years and prior to that worked in statistics, but as there was no local work in that field, she was looking to requalify in accounting. She started studying at a local polytechnic a few years ago and had cross-credited her courses towards the degree she was now aiming for. Bella was motivated solely by the qualification at the end and was not looking forward to studying. She took three courses and was confident of her numerical abilities but not her literacy. She did not like writing essays and felt that studying in her second language was going to be a challenge. She thought her husband would be helpful in that regard. Her strengths were her confidence as a learner and her supportive family.

Bella's husband was very helpful throughout the semester, doing all the cooking, and transporting Pippa when he was home, but his job did take him away some weeks. Bella worked consistently hard and put in many hours – she quit the gym and then her voluntary job and she reduced her time with friends to give more time to her study, but she did miss these things during the semester. She struggled at times and emailed tutors for help but commented that she missed having the opportunity to talk face-to-face. The family had a strong work ethic: you set goals and you work towards them; quitting is not an option. Bella had high expectations of herself and was proud when she did well on her assessments and this increased her motivation to work hard. Noisy neighbours were a problem and so they moved house, but this took a lot of Bella's time and energy and for a while, she was behind on her study. She finished the semester with two A+ grades and a B+. Despite not initially liking the idea of distance learning, she came to enjoy her study and value its flexibility. She felt she learned how better to manage her time and so would not get behind in future.

Bella: Yes, I do feel more confident about studying...I enjoy the achievement.

Li (husband): At the end of the day she can tell Pippa, look see I did, I did get a good mark (laughs). It's an encouragement for her as well.

## Bex

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*Bex: I want to be able to have a good life... I don't want to have to go from job to job, I want to be in a job where I've actually worked for. I want to be able to do things with my kids, I want to be able to go on holiday.*

Bex was 27 years old, flatting and working full time in an office job. She was enrolled in two business courses, working towards a graduate diploma. Bex hated school when she was younger and although her parents tried to persuade her to stay, she left so she could work, and party with her friends. In the last six months, however, she had re-evaluated her life. She had given up drinking, lost considerable weight, and now spent her time quietly at home. She was studying to improve her future, to get a better job, and to prove to her family that she could be successful. While at the outset it looked like she had few challenges facing her, for instance she had no other time commitments outside of her job, the semester did not progress well.

Unfortunately, Bex was given poor advice and was taking second year courses despite not having studied before. It quickly becomes apparent that the work was very challenging for her; she did not understand the requirements of the first assignment and was reluctant to seek help. She very quickly got behind and then her epilepsy, which had been well controlled with medication, started to flare up making concentration very difficult. An additional problem for Bex was that she did not enjoy the format of the learning. She was very disconcerted to realise there were no printed resources, and one course expected her to participate in the online discussion forum, which she found daunting; she was worried that she was not as clever as other students. In the end, she felt she was too far behind to recover and so withdrew from study mid semester. She felt strongly that distance study was not for her, that she needed the motivation of a teacher's presence and the opportunity to talk with people and ask questions immediately and in person. At the follow up interview, Bex also talked about how little interest she had in the topics, which she found made it difficult for her to motivate herself to do the work. She chose the business courses solely because they aligned with her current job but she did not love her work and she would prefer to study interior design, a subject that really interested and excited her. It was a disappointing and frustrating semester for Bex.

*Bex: It's, it's so hard. Like that's what I think, I would be so much better in a class... just because it's, I could be there to ask questions. I'd be able to just write things down then and there. So just having to focus.*

# Brad

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Brad: *In engineering you can only go so far and you get to a glass ceiling.  
Well it's not a glass ceiling; it's quite a solid ceiling.*

Jane (wife): *I've just put my foot down and said, right, we're both working full time  
and we're both studying so we're getting a cleaner.*

Brad, aged 48, was a full time engineer. He felt he needed a formal qualification to progress further in his career and to gain management skills. His goal was a Bachelor of Business, majoring in Management, and he estimated that if he took summer courses, it would take him four years. Brad's wife, Jane, was also studying part time and was keen to support Brad. His son, Emile, stayed every second weekend. Brad had a long commute to work and he had to go away for a week at times. He chose what he thought were two easier courses to start with and said that if he felt the workload was too high then he would reduce to one course each semester. His initial approach was pragmatic – for instance, he did not think he would participate in forums and he planned to do only the compulsory readings. He saw Jane's academic skills as a useful resource. While he was studying to get a work related qualification, he admitted that it was also "degree envy" – his wife, siblings, and colleagues all have degrees.

Brad planned to study at the office after work because he felt that home was too full of distractions. At the initial interview, Brad was confident that the university's estimate of the number of hours required was high and that he would not need to put in so much time. Reality did not align with those expectations. As a result, he was spending a full day at work and then staying in the office for two or three more hours and getting home too tired to do more than eat and go to bed. He hated that he was not seeing much of his wife. Another barrier for Brad was the structure of the course. His work often required him to go away but the course assessments were only available between Thursday and Sunday of each week. This meant that he could not get either ahead or behind and did not therefore have the ability to fit the study around his work schedule. After three weeks, he was exhausted from his work and study schedule and decided it was not a price he was willing to pay, so he withdrew from his study.

Brad: *I feel like a loser. At work at 7am, not home till 8.30pm. My dog doesn't recognise me, neither does my wife. Dropped one paper which means it will take me eight years.  
By then I will be 57 years old. I can't remember things. Too tired.*

# Charlotte

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*Charlotte: I like to learn. I think it keeps your brain alive and I'm always looking into things and researching things I'm interested in so it's not like, it's not going to be a new thing for me.*

Twenty-five year old Charlotte lived with her fiancé, Alberto, in a rented city home. They both worked full time, Charlotte in administration and Alberto in IT. While Charlotte did well at school, she did not enjoy it and her attendance was minimal. She wanted to be a pilot so left school and did a one-year flying training course with both theoretical and practical elements. She could not get work in the industry at the time. However, this was still her goal and so she was doing a Bachelor of Aviation Management. She was able to cross credit some of her previous training and was enrolled in two courses and keen to finish quickly. The degree was only available at a campus in a different city, so distance study was her only option. She was confident she could cope academically and saw finding time as the biggest challenge. Alberto was supportive and happy to take on more household chores to help. Charlotte was pleased to discover a friend was doing the same course and felt they would be good support for each other.

Charlotte started strongly, attending the local academic writing and study skills course. She put in regular hours and worked steadily. She particularly enjoyed one course as it related more directly to flying and her earlier learning, while the generic business course held less interest. As the semester progressed, Charlotte developed a routine and study took top priority as she really wanted to do well. She was disappointed in her first grades but later felt she had had unrealistic expectations. She was particularly frustrated when her friend got a higher grade despite them agreeing that their work was similar. Health problems and fatigue made things difficult for a while and then, near the end of the semester, Charlotte was surprised (but pleased) to discover she was pregnant. The early pregnancy was marked by complications, bad morning sickness, and fatigue. Nevertheless, she stuck with it and sat both exams. She was a little disappointed with her final grades, C+ and B. At the time of the second interview, she was feeling better and was making good progress on her three second-semester courses.

*Charlotte: I just wanted to keep up, make sure I didn't get behind because I do have quite a history of procrastinating, so I wanted to keep up with everything and make sure I was a little bit ahead of it, just in case something happened later on, which you know, it did (laughs) so it was probably a good idea.*

# Daniel

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*Daniel: Whereas if it was history, I can easily pick up a book and keep going. And I have to rein myself in when I find a topic within a book that's completely off topic; I have to stop myself from reading it because I'll just keep reading it.*

*Lily (wife): I understand the sacrifice I guess ... and I know that, I understand, because I've done distance study for a long time.*

Daniel, 26, was married to Lily and was working full time as a graphic designer. He was keen to change his career and become a teacher and so planned to complete a BA majoring in history before doing postgraduate teacher training. He started with one single and one double semester course. His love of history and therefore his strong interest in the topic of the history course was a key strength and he extended his reading and learning beyond the course materials. In contrast, he lacked motivation on the academic writing course but none-the-less managed to do what was required. He was used to meeting deadlines in his work, a skill that transferred to study well.

Daniel had excellent support from his partner, Lily, not just emotional and practical support, but also useful academic support as she had recently finished her own studies, also by distance. While he had a few life challenges during the semester including a broken hand and some problems at work, Daniel was highly committed, put most of his spare time into his study, and was rewarded with increasingly good marks. He was keen to participate in online discussions and was disappointed when few other students took part. His initial fears around academic writing skills were quickly assuaged, helped by Lily's advice. Daniel finished the semester with a B+, and after experiencing more success in the second semester, he has now decided to give up his paid job so that he can study full time.

*Daniel: I got As and stuff and I was super surprised coz I don't think I've ever got an A in my life so, yeah I mean, that just spurred me on to study more and stuff, I didn't sort of go backwards I went forwards which was quite good.*

## Jeremiah

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*Jeremiah: I just want to get started. I just want to be, I want to make the first step, make the next step and then that will answer 95% of my doubts and questions and worries will disappear because I'll know what I'm doing.*

*Jennie (partner): We'll do it together, and we will support each other and provide for each other and we will both have the journey.*

After the recent earthquakes and bouts of depression, Jeremiah, aged 51, left his job as a truck driver in Christchurch, moved north, and was planning to complete a BA in English. He was inspired by his interest in the topic and his desire to tell stories but also hoped it would lead to work. Because of his age, Jeremiah was keen to finish his degree before he turns 55 when he will no longer be eligible for a student allowance. His partner, Jennie, was supportive and they both made Jeremiah's study their top priority. Jennie was unemployed and seeking work. Challenges for Jeremiah heading into the semester were his lack of academic skills, his low self-efficacy, and his history of depression. In his favour was his computer literacy, his self-awareness from the counselling he has received, and the time that he had available to dedicate to his study.

During the semester, Jeremiah felt out of his depth at times but he persevered and feedback on his assignments helped to restore his confidence. He worked hard and was always ahead of schedule with assignments. His initial low confidence meant that he was delighted with any passing grades, and each time he passed, his confidence grew. Distance study worked well for Jeremiah because it enabled him to take time out when his depression pulled him down. He also loved that he could get ahead, work when he felt like it, and focus on what interested him that day. Jeremiah's semester was a success. He ended with a B grade on the course he finished, was continuing his two double semester courses, and was starting two more in the second semester. He had gained learning, but also confidence in himself, and was enjoying his new identity as a successful student.

*Jeremiah: And being told that you can get 96 and you can get a B+, oh hey, I'm not just an idiot after all, I can achieve something and it did make me feel good.*

# Kaitlyn

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*Kaitlyn: I know I can do it because I'm determined. I'm that type of person.  
If I want to do something, I'll do it and nothing stops me.*

*Melody (daughter): It will be pretty tough for everyone. But I reckon she can do it.  
But yeah, that just means I'll have to do more stuff around the house.*

*Kaitlyn was 36 years old, the sole parent of two children aged 15 (Melody) and 10 (Rose). They lived in a rented city home and Kaitlyn was on a benefit while home schooling her younger daughter. Kaitlyn was previously studying psychology at a distance-learning polytechnic and, after working part time as a teacher aide, decided to complete her teacher training. She initially planned to study part time but as that meant she could not borrow her course costs, she enrolled full time. She felt she had good study skills and habits due to her past learning. She was however concerned about writing essays as she said she got "writer's block".*

*Kaitlyn started well with carefully planned timetables for herself and her daughters. She had a lot of assessments due and was kept very busy meeting all the deadlines. She was happy to seek help and contacted staff when she was finding an essay difficult and was pleased to be given an extension and encouragement to persevere. Her daughters were supportive; a little worried at how hard their mother was working, but cheering when she finished each assignment. Kaitlyn used the online discussion forums a lot, to seek help, and to connect with other people who were struggling. As the semester progressed and she stayed on top of the workload, she felt very proud and commented that her self-esteem had rocketed. Things started to go downhill about eight weeks into the semester. Several issues influenced Kaitlyn's engagement. Firstly, there were problems within her immediate and extended family, including an expectation that Kaitlyn fix things. Secondly, she received very poor grades on several assignments and found it very difficult to accept the feedback, feeling it undermined her as a student. Finally, the university announced changes to the teacher training programme and she thought that meant she was wasting her time doing the course. When I last heard from Kaitlyn, she was considering dropping one course but was planning to sit the other exams. She ended the semester with a fail grade on one course and DNC on the remainder.*

*Kaitlyn: Things in the past couple of weeks have been hectic to say the least.  
There has been so much going on to the point of me feeling absolutely exhausted,  
emotionally and physically... I can't focus at the moment on studies.*

## Lexi

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Lexi: *There will be adjustments to make as we all settle down to the new routine.*

With four children aged between one and seven, Lexi (aged 25) already had a busy life before she took on two courses towards a Bachelor of Accountancy. She was studying so that when the children were older she would be able to develop a career for herself. Lexi hated school, particularly the social aspects, and she left early. The children and their rural location meant that distance study was the only option, but Lexi was confident that she would also enjoy the freedom from schedules. Her husband, Michael, managed the farm that they live on. He was supportive of Lexi's decision and took the children out with him on the farm whenever he could. One of their twin daughters had an ongoing heart problem that required regular medical appointments.

Lexi scheduled her time carefully from the very beginning of the semester, including using the baby's nap times and evenings once Michael came in from the farm and could take over the children. She organised a study group of local students that ended up as a Facebook group and was a valuable ongoing support for her. Lexi's study skills developed through the semester and she did well in assessments from the beginning. The family adjusted well to her study and learned when not to interrupt her; she also became adept at multitasking – combining study with different activities, including in an empty room after gym class and at the hospital cafeteria when her daughter was in surgery. The semester was not without its challenges including various childhood illnesses, a broken laptop, and the seasonal demands of a farming lifestyle. However, she worked consistently throughout the semester and at one point commented that it was not as hard as she expected and that she could perhaps manage three courses next time. She finished the semester with a B- and B grade and was continuing with two more courses the next semester.

Michael (husband): *It's been quite hard fitting the kids around work while she's studying but I've managed to do that.*

Lexi: *The knowledge that I can do it and it's not, that hard and that it can be done.*

# Maria

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*Maria: I'm going to try my hardest. I'm already on there doing tests that you can access to try and see what my grades are. I want to do well.*

Maria was 36 years old, married to John, with a one-year-old son. While Maria did okay at school, she was not interested and so dropped out. She returned to study at age 25 and completed a qualification in outdoor education. Since Leo was born, she has been at home and was studying to prepare herself for a change of career later, and to give herself an interest outside of parenting. She also liked being a role model for her son. She felt she had good knowledge of herself as a learner, which would be valuable. She chose distance study as they live in a rural community and she felt that she would be happy studying solo as she had plenty of people connections in other areas of her life. She was enrolled in three courses towards a degree in environmental science and ecology, a subject she was passionately interested in.

John thought Maria studying would help keep her happy and he was keen to support her. Maria started her course work as soon as she received the materials, three weeks before the official start of the semester. She studied during nap times and every evening once Leo was in bed, a routine she continued throughout the semester. She thoroughly enjoyed the learning, finding it challenging at times but trialling different strategies and approaches whenever she felt stuck. Differences in teaching style as well as her perception that one course had excessive content and assessment meant she enjoyed that course less than the others. She attended compulsory campus courses during the mid-semester break. She was initially terrified about being less smart than the other students, but really enjoyed the classes and opportunity to interact with others. She continued to structure her days very carefully and did well on the various assessments, although she felt that there was too much focus on "memorising and unloading". Despite feeling very overwhelmed near the end of the semester, with multiple assessments due and exams looming, Maria finished in good spirits with a B- grade. By the follow up interview, she was pregnant and so had decided to finish her two double semester courses but not take on any more at that point. She felt she would return to her study once the baby was a little older.

*Maria: Just really enjoying the learning, learning stuff, different stuff. And it's funny, it almost feels like, like it's all stuff I'm interested in, that probably helps but, yeah, it almost feels like it doesn't matter what it is (laughs). I'm just happy to be learning.*

## Marie

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*Marie: We just have to adjust really. This first semester, if I do the writing paper only, it will be easier just to slip into it, get a bit of a routine going and see what I can and can't fit in.*

Marie was a 38-year-old sole parent. One son lived with his father and the other, 17 year old Tom, lived with Marie in a small rural town. Marie was very involved in her community and unwilling to move, so distance study was her only option. While she would have liked face-to-face learning, she was confident distance study would not be a problem. Marie did well at school although health problems hampered her final years. A particular strength for Marie was her self-efficacy having enjoyed completing two university distance courses four years earlier through her job. She left her previous role because of health issues and as she had no formal qualifications, she was keen to retrain in preparation for a new direction. Initially, Marie enrolled for full time study in psychology, but she was then unexpectedly offered a good job in a nearby town and so decided to continue with just one course in academic writing. Tom was supportive and didn't think his mother studying would affect his life much.

Marie planned to study in the living areas at home and possibly during lunch breaks in the new job. She was anticipating enjoying learning writing skills and felt it would set her up well for the rest of her courses. The new job started in the second week of the semester and she found it very exciting and busy with plenty of challenging opportunities. She managed to fit in the study for the first few weeks and was enjoying the online learning that the course offered, as well as the first assignment. She was concerned however, that she was not able to spend much time with Tom and was a little worried that she would lose the strong connection she had with him. She was also aware that she was not exercising as much as previously, which was important because of her long-term health issues. Six weeks into the semester, Marie decided to withdraw from her study. As much as she was enjoying the course, her job had long hours plus some travel and she felt that she needed to prioritise the people in her life and her own health and well-being.

*Marie: Unfortunately, after some challenging decision making, I have had to withdraw from the study... the people I love and care for and who invest time in me, I also felt were missing out, and they may not be around tomorrow.*

## Melissa

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*Melissa: That's why I love learning, because it does immediately have an impact on your life.*

Melissa was a 46-year-old mother of two children, Jason aged 14 and Chelsea aged 9. She worked part time running exercise programmes and was taking one course towards a Diploma in Rehabilitation Studies. She was driven by her passionate interest in the topic and her desire to help people through working in the field of rehabilitation. She did well at school and had a certificate from a local polytechnic and so had a positive learner identity. Initially it looked like Melissa's biggest challenge was going to be her lifeload – as well as being a sole parent and working part time, she was a key support for her partner who had had a stroke.

Melissa started her study two weeks early and quickly discovered effective study routines. She was very focussed during the semester, committing all her free time to her study; school holidays proved challenging but she managed the juggle well. She loved the course content and was excited by the parallels with her own experiences and the opportunities to apply the knowledge she was gaining. However, frustration with academic writing expectations, plus difficulties with her low computer skills, were strong barriers. Her high expectations of herself meant she was disappointed with 70% grades for the two essays; in addition, she felt irritated that she was being penalised for what she saw as pedantic details rather than being rewarded for her understanding of the topic. She found the lack of face-to-face contact difficult at times and had some negative experiences with staff. She finished the semester with a C+ grade, which was disappointing for her. While Melissa passed another course in the second semester, she has subsequently decided that university study was not for her, that the learning approach was too "academic". On the plus side, she had a new job in the mental health sector and felt that the study gave her valuable knowledge as well as increased credibility and confidence. Melissa's story is explored in more depth in the case study analysis presented in Chapter 6.

*Melissa: So I see the world different as a result of doing that one paper.  
My world view around rehabilitation is different.*

## Natasha

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Natasha: I'm looking forward to broadening my knowledge base. I don't have a lot of book learning, so for me I'm quite excited about that, to get some real intelligence (laughs) as opposed to the street smarts.

Natasha was 38, single with no children, renting a house with one flatmate. She did shift work, four days on then four days off, and wanted to make better use of her spare time. Her past learning experiences were mostly positive; she enjoyed school and did well, but at university she put her energy into a social life rather than the work, failed some courses and decided not to return after the first year. She did not regret this and felt that now was the right time for study. A potential challenge for Natasha was a number of chronic health conditions that, while well managed, can flare up with stress. She was enrolled full time in a Bachelor of Communications, which she felt would be useful for her current role as well as potentially lead to other opportunities. Her job meant distance study was the only option and at the start she was worried about the apparent lack of structure and timetables in the courses. She was also aware that she might have taken on too much. She felt writing would be a challenge for her, but she had support available from her work colleagues, many of whom were also studying.

Natasha started well, working steadily through the course materials. Life got more challenging when she decided to buy a house, a considerable distraction from her studies. Her hobby involved working at occasional weekend car rallies, and this took large chunks of her time and energy. The middle of the semester, with many assignments due at once and the move to her new home, was particularly challenging, but determination and hard work got her through and she successfully met all the deadlines. As expected, she struggled with the writing and felt she was penalised unfairly even though her essay content was good. More assignments plus the financial need to work more hours resulted in her struggling to stay on top and she felt she had taken on too much. She got behind and so withdrew from two courses the week before exams so she could focus on the others. Natasha finished the semester with a B and two DNC grades. She was not happy and so was taking fewer courses in the second semester so she could do better.

Natasha: And it has been a good challenge, yeah, okay I've had ups, I've had downs, I've had stumbles, I've lost a grand, nyeh, but at the end of the day I did my first exam in 20 years, I passed my first paper in 20 years, I've written my first essay in 20 years and these are all good things.

## Penny

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*Penny: I'm in a place where I believe I can manage the study, still learn, gain from that and place it in my place of work. So I think it's still a valuable tool for me.*

Penny's children were all grown up and she was living with her adult daughter and working full time. In her late 50s, she had left school young as she was expected to get a job and then get married. She completed a diploma in early childhood at a polytechnic 10 years ago, the first in her family to go into any tertiary education. She was working in family support and felt that gaining a qualification in social work could open up new opportunities for her. She was enrolled in two courses towards a Diploma in Social Work. She would have preferred to attend a local institution but her workplace were not supportive and so distance study was the only option. She was very excited to be in formal learning again and was looking forward to making connections between the course content and her work with families. However, she did find the idea of online learning daunting and did not really trust the technology.

It was a short semester for Penny as she withdrew from study after just two weeks. She had what she described as a meltdown, and this triggered a reassessment of her life. Certainly one factor was financial: She took a student loan for the course fees but had not realised repayments would be automatically deducted from her pay starting straight away. At the same time, she had lost access to a work vehicle and so had increased costs. Another factor was the lack of support from her workplace, who said that the training was unnecessary. She was keeping an eye out for other work but increasingly felt she would be unlikely to get another job at her age. She was enjoying the learning but these barriers plus the time the study required being more than she was willing to commit at this time in her life led to her decision to withdraw. She was sad but philosophical about the outcome.

*Penny: Oh just that I've made some decisions and so I've had to pull out .... I think it was about a lot of things... it was about my age and how I was feeling about things and I actually can't count more than two hands to retirement.*

## Samantha

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*Samantha: I might feel a bit guilty for taking my time away from them, especially the children, and I suppose you get a wee bit torn when you are doing these things. Should I be studying, should I be spending time with them?*

*Steven (husband): I don't think it will have much effect on me... probably won't see her as much; probably have to stop annoying her.*

Samantha left school at 15, pregnant with her eldest son. She liked school but felt that poor classroom management meant she was not taught well. She was now 33, married to Steven, with three children aged 17, 12, and 4. She had done training courses in hospitality and beauty therapy and now she was the first in her family to go to university. Samantha likes learning and was motivated by the desire to get a good job and to be a positive role model for her children. She was aiming for a social work degree, taking two courses but concerned the workload may be too much. She chose distance study for the flexibility but was worried it would be lonely. Her family did not expect her study to affect them, just that they might see less of her. Her lack of academic skills and finding time around her family were potential challenges at the outset.

Samantha started slowly, delaying getting her textbooks because of financial issues, procrastinating as she found the level of the work daunting, and struggling to find the time as her son was not yet back at kindergarten. Within a few weeks, her husband felt her study was taking too much time. The family were struggling financially and Samantha wondered if she should look for work. She tried to find people to study with but was not successful. The work was challenging and it took her a lot of time to understand the course materials, so she started to slip behind. She did enjoy the learning however, particularly the child development as she could see its relevance to her family. Despite getting extensions on assignments and good support from staff, a continued lack of support from her family, school holidays, and struggles with the level of the work meant she became more discouraged. The final straw was taking a part time job where she was pressured to do longer hours, leaving less time for her study. She finished the semester with two DNC grades after not completing all the assessments.

*Samantha: It's been hard going, trying to come home and study, trying to deal with the kids, trying to go to work and trying to get Steven to see that this is important to me. Then I start to doubt myself and think, is this important to me? Am I out of my league? Am I doing something that I was never really capable of?*

## Sarah

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*Sarah: When I'm not panicking about how it's going to go, when I can actually stop thinking about the anxiety thoughts related to it, and just go, wow, I'm finally studying psychology! I'm going to love it.*

*Richard: There will be times when I go, honey, go study, go study. I'm taking the boys to the park. Go study.*

Sarah was 25, married to Richard with two children aged five and three, and pregnant with her third. The family were about to move to their own home in the country following renovations. Living in the country as a child, Sarah attended correspondence school but did not go on to university because the idea of leaving home was too terrifying. Sarah was enrolled full time in a BA and her long-term goal was to become a clinical psychologist. She did not consider studying part time, describing herself as not a "half and half" person. Richard was supportive and planned to help with the boys but also talked of the need to maintain his own life. Sarah was fascinated by the topic of psychology and was looking forward to learning more. She was confident about her learning ability but was worried that moving house in the first semester would make things difficult. She had planned her study time carefully around the children but did not start studying before the official start of the semester.

After two weeks, Sarah felt she was doing well despite some issues with the design of one course. By week three, things were not so positive. Moving house plus her son's birthday took time and while she had completed one assessment, she was behind on another. At this point, serious complications with her pregnancy, which continued throughout the semester, meant she was in and out of hospital. She withdrew from one course but persevered with the others. Richard was an excellent support, taking over most of the house care and much of the childcare, as well as helping look after Sarah. Unfortunately, she was unable to sit her exams as she went into labour. She was awarded aegrotat passes on those courses and continued to work on her other double semester course. She withdrew from her planned second semester courses to allow her to focus on her new daughter and was unsure of her plans.

*Sarah: [My] advice would be, don't bite off more than you can chew, take what you think you can do, and then half it. And then if you found that to be a breeze, well done, you can take on more next time. Instead of, gee you bit off more than you can chew and now you're not going to be able to do any of it properly.*

## Scott

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*Scott: I want to earn more money. I want to better myself.*

Scott was a 38 year old father of three children aged 4, 8, and 13. His wife, Sharon, was a full time student. The family were not available to be interviewed. Scott was working full time in sales and felt that he could not progress to the next level without a formal qualification so he was working towards a Bachelor of Business Studies, starting with a single course to see how he went. He would have preferred to study full time as an internal student but the family could not support two full time students and distance learning would allow him to fit study around his job. His work and boss were supportive of his decision. Scott did not like school when he was younger and he saw his English and writing skills as weaknesses but he was looking forward to the challenge of learning.

Scott started reading the course materials well in advance of the semester and organised a desk in a corner of the living areas. He attended a locally run orientation course for new distance students and made good use of the supports and resources that were available. His first few weeks went well, but before long things were challenging at home with the family getting sick and his wife's study needs taking priority. He enjoyed the learning and was putting in as much time as he could but he found juggling family, work, and study very difficult. By the fourth week, he was considering quitting the study and was getting a little behind on the course. The family also decided to move house at this time so looking for a new property was an additional challenge. A few weeks later, when they did move, difficulties with the telecommunications company meant they had no internet access and so Scott slipped further behind. Things were also not going well with his wife and he felt that she was not giving him any support. Eventually he made the difficult decision to withdraw. By the time of the follow-up interview, Scott's wife and children had moved out. Reflecting on the semester, he said while he had enjoyed the learning and found it interesting and relevant to his work, he had realised that business was not his passion. At that point, he was considering giving up his job and enrolling full time to study aeronautical design.

*Scott: If everything was good in the relationship and the internet, everything was in the perfect world I probably would have finished the paper and passed it. But it was just, yeah the catalyst of everything and everything had built up to the point it was like, and then also me going, eeehhh maybe it's not something I wanna do.*

## Toni

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Toni: *I'm doing this for me. I don't know what's going to happen next year or the end of this year. I'm just doing it for me. Because I can do it.*

Toni, 52, worked full time on contract as an administrator in the health sector. She had raised her four children alone and her youngest was just leaving home to attend university; she was expecting to be home alone, however an older son, in need of support, had recently returned home. For Toni, her children were still her top priority and knowing they are okay was necessary to allow her to focus on her study. She left school young, a decision she regrets, feeling her parents could have pushed her more. She recently completed a certificate in Māori studies and this triggered the desire to continue studying. Toni was taking two courses towards a Health Sciences Diploma. Her fees were paid by an organisation supporting Māori in the health sector, although she was motivated more by the challenge of learning than workplace goals.

Toni attended the local orientation course the weekend before the start of the semester and learned about the support services available, but she did not realise she could have started working on the course earlier. Later she commented that she wished she had started earlier and stronger. She found it very hard initially and for the first few weeks she thought about giving up, but each time she decided to persevere. She enjoyed the learning, in particular the anthropology course, although she found the language challenging at times. She made sure to use all the support services: She attended academic writing courses for distance students and the campus-based session for her course, and she happily contacted staff when she needed help or felt overwhelmed. The staff were supportive and encouraged her to continue, giving extensions as required. She was delighted to get B grades for her first assessments but she was continually frustrated and disappointed by what she saw as her inability to manage her time better and to be more organised. This seemed to get worse as the semester progressed. Events outside of study proved a big barrier. She faced many challenges during the semester: problems with her son at home, a lot of stress at work, uncertainty over her contract renewal, and finally, a major health scare towards the end. She ended the semester with a C and D grade and decided not to continue as she felt distance study was not for her.

Toni: *I've come to the realization, I need to, if I'm going to do any papers or any study like this, I need to be there. I need to do it internally. I need to be with a group of people, I need to be where it's actually happening.*

## Vee

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*Vee: I'm not confident also of getting back into the system and also writing all the assignments.*

Vee was 37 years old, married to Lewis, and mother of two girls, Arianne and Emma, aged 15 and 17. The family immigrated to New Zealand from the Philippines a year earlier. Since then, Vee had been at home but previously she worked full time as an accountant. When she was unsuccessful getting work here, she decided an up-to-date New Zealand qualification would help. While she had positive past experiences as a learner, it was a long time ago and the shift in language and culture made her worried that she would fail. She took one business course to test the water and thought she may go full time later if she still could not find work.

Vee's family were right behind her decision to study and they provided both emotional and practical support throughout the semester. Doing just one course and having a stable supportive family environment enabled Vee to put in the time that she needed to understand the course materials and she did considerably more than the recommended 12 hours most weeks. She also made good use of the supports and resources available including the assignment pre-reading service and attending the campus course. She enjoyed learning about the New Zealand business world, particularly in comparison to her home country. Vee did well on all her assessments and was rapt to finish the semester with an A+ grade. Her family were very proud and at the time of the follow up interview, she was excited to have an upcoming job interview.

*Vee: There is a real sense of purpose. [I am] proud that I am studying and learning more about myself (how I react to pressure and what my weaknesses are).  
My confidence level is going up.*

Lewis (husband): *Maybe it's like what, she's saying... we are just adapting*

Arianne (daugheter): *Yeah I mean we help each other out when we have to.*

Lewis: *When there's no food, then we produce it!*