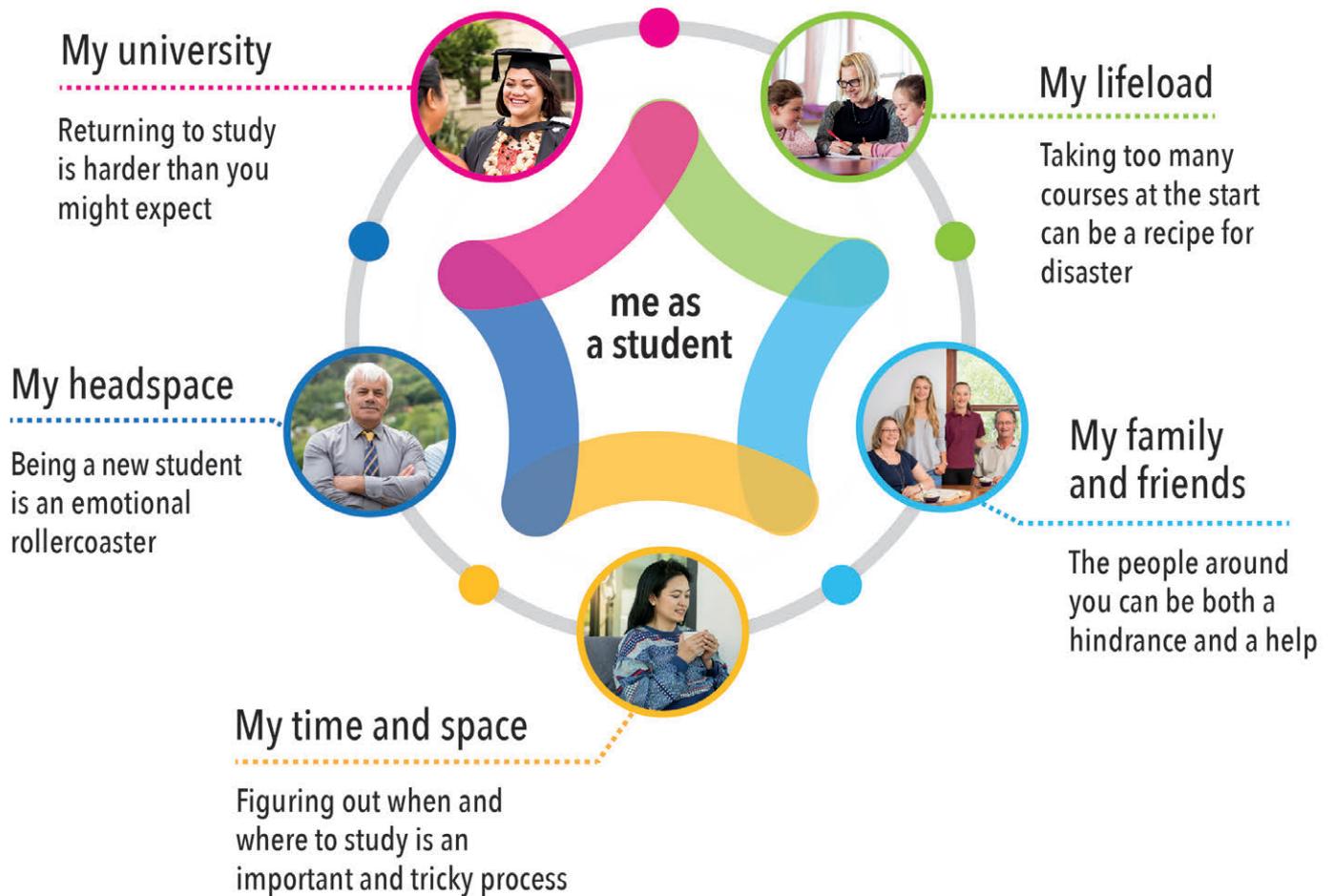


Becoming a distance student

Identifying and managing the challenges of first year distance study



The first year of distance study at university is hard.

About 25% of first year, distance, students are unsuccessful – they withdraw, fail, or just give up. They pay the fees but they don't get the benefits. And they go away discouraged and disheartened.

But that doesn't have to be you.

This resource, based on research with students just like you, will help you identify the challenges you might face in your first year and give you some ideas on how to manage those challenges. This is not a resource about study skills (your university will have plenty of those and you should use them). This is about how to fit being a student into your life, your home and your family.

Kaitlyn: *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. (Sole parent of two, failed/withdrew from four courses.)*



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. (Mother of two and pregnant, passed two of four courses.)*

Brad: *They say 25 hours for two subjects, which is ridiculous... I'm hoping 8-10 hours will be enough. (Father of one, full time work, withdrew from both courses.)*

My lifeload

Taking too many courses at the start can be a recipe for disaster

In their eagerness to get going, new students often take on too many courses in their first year. When they calculate how many hours they have available, they assume life is perfect and forget that kids get sick, work gets busy, and families visit. And that sometimes you just don't feel like studying! Students who take a full time load in their first semester often either fail their courses or drop some of them part way through.

What can help?

Be realistic about what you can manage and start small. The university recommends 10-12 hours a week for each course but the first semester is a steep learning curve – everything takes longer and you need extra time to learn all the new skills. So take just one or two courses – you can always speed up once you know what it's like.

My family and friends

The people around you can be both a hindrance and a help

For distance students, while family and friends can be a valuable support, they can also be a barrier. Family may start with intentions of taking on more household work but it is a long road and that doesn't always last. Students can also feel guilty for the time study takes from the family and partners may resent it when the student prioritises their study.

What can help?

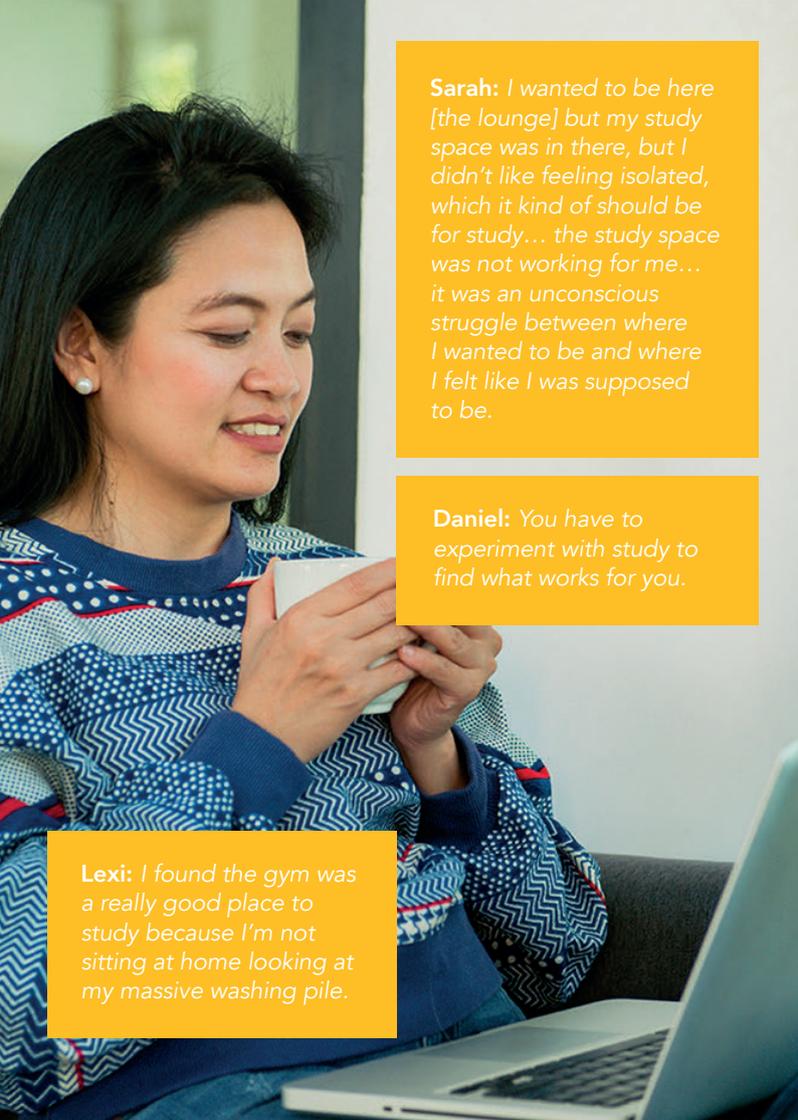
Be clear about what you need to study successfully and about why it is important. Ask for help – family and friends can offer emotional support as well as practical support and, if you are lucky, academic support. But sometimes they need to be asked. Talk with your children about why you are studying and how they can be helpful – it is a big change for them so starting with fewer courses can help them adjust to the new routines.

Samantha: *I had him [son] watching TV or whatever, or he was out here by himself and I was on the computer, I felt really guilty. I felt like I was neglecting him, doing that. Felt really bad about that.*

Lexi: *It's starting to become a bit of a struggle. When the kids were sick and now that it's raining... and Lucy's becoming more demanding for attention... the whole novelty of 'got to be quiet because Mum's studying' is sort of wearing off.*



Scott: *The amount of support wasn't there and it was decreasing ... I was getting less and less all the time... So, yeah it made it hard because I got frustrated a lot and got frustrated more and more and more.*



Sarah: *I wanted to be here [the lounge] but my study space was in there, but I didn't like feeling isolated, which it kind of should be for study... the study space was not working for me... it was an unconscious struggle between where I wanted to be and where I felt like I was supposed to be.*

Daniel: *You have to experiment with study to find what works for you.*

Lexi: *I found the gym was a really good place to study because I'm not sitting at home looking at my massive washing pile.*

My time and space

Figuring out when and where to study is an important and tricky process

Students choose to study by distance because it is seen as flexible and an ideal way to fit study into full and complex lives. But students still have to find the space and time to study. This can be difficult when home is a shared space and time is stretched between multiple life roles. New students struggle to find enough quality time and can get behind very quickly. Catching up is extremely difficult.

What can help?

Be flexible in your approach to finding the right space and time to study. There is no one right way to do this – you need to try different places and different times to learn what works for you, what works for your family, and what works for particular study tasks. And be creative – for instance some study tasks can be done in the smaller chunks of shared time and space – lunchtime at work or in the car at the kids' netball practice.

My headspace

Being a new student is an emotional rollercoaster

We know that learning is a deeply emotional process but new students can be unprepared for the range and depth of emotions they will experience. Negative emotions are common - facing new challenges and experiences triggers anxiety, a lack of understanding of academic processes can be frustrating, and the work can be relentless and sometimes boring. Research shows that if left unchecked those negative emotions can reduce student motivation and make learning more difficult.

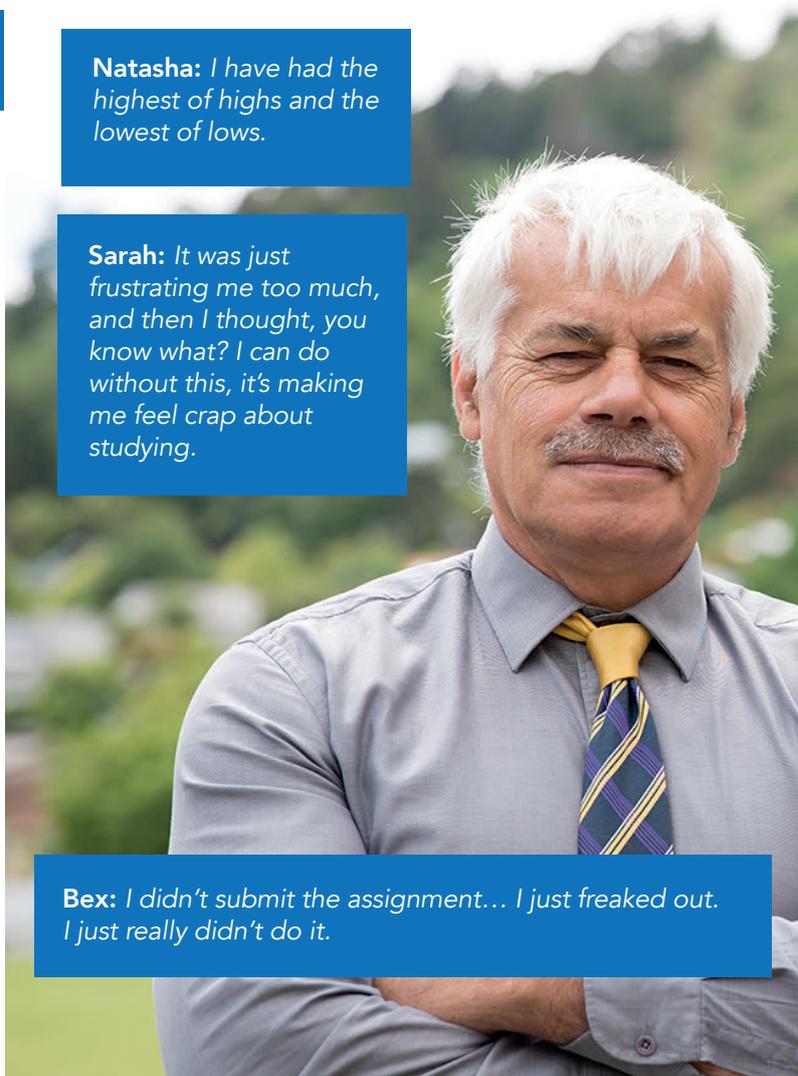
What can help?

Be prepared for this - recognise that these emotions are normal and that you are not the only one freaking out. Manage the negative emotions by talking things over with family and friends, and with students online with tools such as Facebook. Aim to increase positive emotions – look for ways to make the content interesting and relevant to you, and remember to celebrate and feel proud of every small step you take.

Natasha: *I have had the highest of highs and the lowest of lows.*

Sarah: *It was just frustrating me too much, and then I thought, you know what? I can do without this, it's making me feel crap about studying.*

Bex: *I didn't submit the assignment... I just freaked out. I just really didn't do it.*



Daniel: *I haven't written since I left school after fifth form... and then having to write that, I was quite nervous. I was like, oh my god, 1500-2000 words, oh my lord!*

Jeremiah: *I knew I was going to get stressed before the exam. Crikey, first time I'd had an exam in 30 something years*

Charlotte: *I am a total perfectionist and coming from a background where we were always pushed so hard to aim for 100% in theory subjects, it felt that anything less than an A on my assignment was like a failure.*

My university

Returning to study is harder than you might expect

To be a successful university student requires a lot of new skills: academic writing, effective reading, exam revision, library research, referencing etc. Students who come to university as adults often find it difficult to go back to being a beginner. They may be successful in other areas of life and so expect to be instantly great at study as well. Their grades are not as high as they expect and they can feel an unwarranted sense of failure.

What can help?

Be kind to yourself and understand that it takes time to learn how to be a great student. Dedicate some of your study time to skill learning. There are online tutorials, websites, other resources, and support staff available to help you – find them and use them. When you get marked work back, see the feedback and the mark as part of the learning process – use it to improve in future. And if in doubt about anything, remember: Smart students seek help.

Learning to be a student and fitting study into your life is complex:

Toni: *"It is like a new person coming into your household you know, if you don't know that person well, or don't know them at all, things are a bit tense and a bit awkward. Takes a lot longer to get to know each other. My goodness. There are things that you like about it and things that you don't like. Sometimes you try to avoid it. I was going to give up, so there we go. I wanted to kick that person out a long time ago."*

The research

These five challenges have been distilled from the findings of Ella Kahu's doctoral research project exploring how mature-aged distance students dealt with their transition to university. The project surveyed over a thousand students and also followed a group of students and their families through their first semester of study.

See <http://www.massey.ac.nz/?bbe6f3841t> for more findings from the research and the stories of some of the participants.