

PROMOTING STUDENT SUCCESS IN ONLINE POST-GRADUATE STUDIES AT A SOUTH AFRICAN UNIVERSITY: THE ROLE OF PROFESSIONAL AND ADMINISTRATIVE SUPPORT

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ABSTRACT

Post-graduate online students studying in cohorts are expected to collaborate effectively with their peers and instructors in the virtual environment and are presumed to have the necessary skills needed for self-directed online learning. However, studies have shown that the low retention and success rates in online learning could be attributed to individual students experiencing a sense of isolation in a community of online students. Providing various non-academic support is as crucial for ensuring success as academic support services. More importantly, the support should acknowledge and address the unique set of skills, experiences, and expectations of the individual student in the community of online learners. This study aimed to ascertain whether professional and administrative student support that focused on the individual needs of the post-graduate student promotes retention and success in online studies. A qualitative case study at a business school at a South African higher education institution evaluated the professional and administrative support types, range and timing in promoting success in online post-graduate studies. This included the content analysis of key documents such as the self-evaluation report and the survey report on evaluation, impact and lifelong learning of a post-graduate qualification, followed by a focus-group session to ascertain staff perceptions of the professional and administrative services and resources in promoting success in online post-graduate studies. Using Simpson's Proactive Motivational Support model (PaMS) as a lens, the study revealed a lack of motivational aspects of student support for online post-graduate students. Furthermore, the results affirmed the presumption of post-graduate students as a homogenous group prepared to succeed in online learning communities. Moreover, that limited provision was made to support online post-graduate students from remote areas and for those with disabilities. The study concludes that a more personalised approach to student support will motivate post-graduate students to become successful self-directed students in a community of online learners. Moreover, a focused school, college and institutional approach and an integrated inter- and intra-institutional collaboration are needed to enhance self-directed learning, foster a sense of belonging, and promote success in

online post-graduate studies.

Keywords: post-graduate studies, professional and administrative support, motivation, self-directed learning, student support

INTRODUCTION

Covid-19 highlighted the importance of Higher Education Institutions making online courses available to all students. During this period, the spotlight was on the student as an individual within a community of learners, highlighting the importance of adequate student support resources and services to ensure student success (Hughes 2004; Gumbo and Gasa 2023; Kelly and Mills 2007; Netanda, Mamabolo, and Themane 2019; Pratt 2015; Stewart et al. 2013; Tang et al. 2021). In this regard, Conrad (2014) claims that students' ability to engage in meaningful and personal connections with one another and the online community at large is key to the effectiveness of online learning and student success.

Post-graduate students who enrol in online courses are presumed to be highly motivated, to possess the necessary competencies for self-directed online learning, and to be able to successfully collaborate with their peers and teachers in order to create their learning networks in the online setting (Brindley 2014; Rotar 2022). However, not all post-graduate students have these attributes. The reviewed literature highlights that isolation is a significant factor influencing doctoral well-being (Ali and Kohun 2006; Deem and Brehony 2000; Lovitts 2001; Ludwig-Hardman and Dunlap 2003), which is brought on by students not being given the skills they need for effective, self-directed online learning (Hughes 2004; Ludwig-Hardman and Dunlap 2003; Moisey and Hughes 2008). Therefore, professional, administrative student support is expected to provide opportunities to acquire these skills and attributes and consider their abilities, experiences, and expectations to succeed in the online learning community (Moisey and Hughes 2008). Various professional administrative support is available to students, especially post-graduate students and the post-digital world (Fawns, Aitken, and Jones 2021). The question is, does the current support system achieve its goal regarding retention and success of post graduate online students?

Therefore, this study aimed to ascertain whether professional and administrative student support, that focuses on the individual needs of the post-graduate student, promotes retention and success. The business school was selected as a study site as all its course offerings and services are aimed at online post-graduate students. The following objectives were undertaken in order to answer the research question. Firstly, a qualitative content analysis of crucial curriculum documents was conducted. Secondly, a focus-group session with a select group of professional administrative support staff was conducted to probe and triangulate insight

emerging from the content analysis,

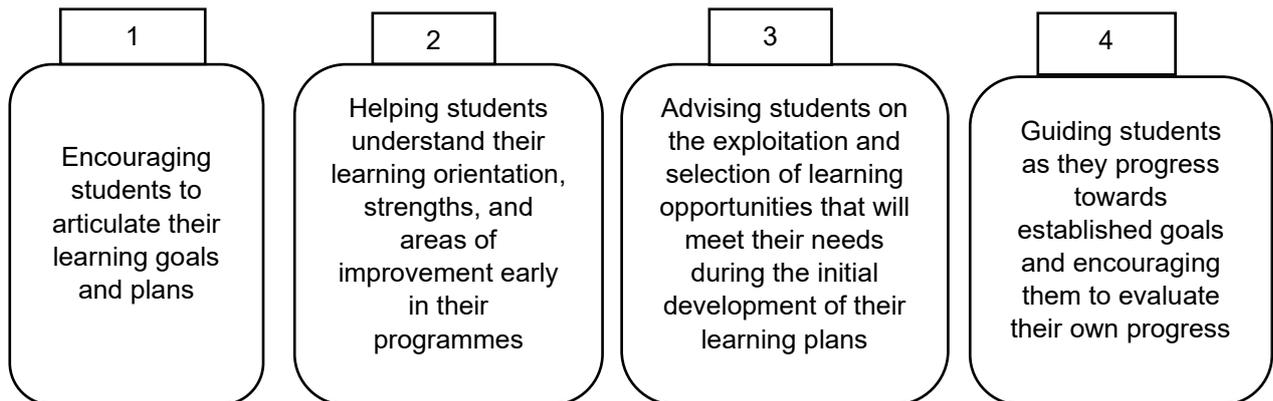
LITERATURE REVIEW

Professional and administrative student support (also referred to as non-academic support) is defined as the varied, all-encompassing types of support that take into account students' physical, social, cultural, and emotional requirements (Fynn and Janse van Vuuren 2017; Waight and Giordanob 2018). According to Moisey and Hughes (2008), offering professional and administrative student support services is as crucial to success as providing academic support services. Despite this, it seems that doctoral students find it challenging to ask for professional support such as pastoral support because doing so might be seen as approaching a more intimate level of communication, deemed inappropriate in the supervisory relationship (Waight and Giordanob 2018, 394).

Stewart et al. (2013) investigated student support as a quality indicator. They concluded that academics and administrators had designed and delivered critical student support services, highlighting the significance of academic and non-academic support (professional and administrative support) for student success. Their study also showed that there is a critical need for student support services in the following areas: admissions and registration, advising (counselling services), orientation, learning support, scholarships and awards, library resources, computing and technology resources, articulation with other institutions, career placement, and communication. Additionally, the importance of timely embedding support interventions where and when they are needed at various stages of the online learning cycle was demonstrated by Rotar's (2022) systematic review of 28 empirical studies on support strategies and interventions, demonstrating a shift to a more individualised yet comprehensive approach to student support. More importantly, utilising learning analytics to identify at-risk students emphasises the potential for personalised interventions as it holds the promise of enhancing the accuracy of targeting timely student support interventions (Buckingham Shum 2012; Rotar 2022; Siemens 2013; Simpson 2013). Furthermore, according to Siemens (2013), it is possible to personalise the learning materials using information about the student's profiles, their conceptual understanding of a subject, and their prior experiences. However, the author cautions that effective analytics practices require organisational support and increased inter- and intra-institutional collaboration to impact significantly how a university supports its students.

Ludwig-Hardman and Dunlap (2003) proposed the practice of scaffolding as a conceptual framework to improve student-to-student contact and foster a sense of belonging to a community of learners. These authors conclude that scaffolding promotes self-directed learning

and decreases student isolation, increasing student retention in online learning environments. More specifically, the authors stress the value of community-building tools, online educational counselling, and metacognitive skills in helping individual students become self-directed students in an online learning community. The proposed scaffolding framework involved the development of an individualised, detailed, structured Academic Action Plan at the beginning of a student's academic programme. Mentors worked one-on-one with students and provided the following levels of scaffolding, as illustrated in the diagram below:



(Adapted from Ludwig-Hardman and Dunlap 2003, 9)

Figure 1: Four levels of scaffolding for an individualised academic plan

The iterative operations of the four levels of scaffolding start with the students articulating their learning goals and plans. Next, the mentors help students to understand their strengths and areas for improvement. This is done at the start of their learning journey. The mentors encourage the students to evaluate their progress in achieving their goals, a critical step towards self-directed learning.

Hughes (2004, 383) asserts that the focus on the learner as an individual within a learning community is enhanced by online learning. In this context, Simpson (2008) proposes the Proactive Motivational Support (PaMS) learning theory, which combines the three approaches of the Self Theory (Dweck 1999), the Strengths Approach (Boniwell 2012), and Proactive Support (Anderson 2003). The “Strengths” Approach focuses on students’ well-being and strengths rather than their shortcomings (gaps in learning) at the start of their learning journey (Simpson 2008). Dweck’s “Self” Theory (1999) focuses on praising students’ efforts rather than their achievements, emphasising the value of resilience and persistence and overcoming setbacks by learning from them. According to Simpson (2008, 168), PaMS has the following characteristics:

- It is individualised, as it focuses on individual student needs rather than a top-down, one-size-fits-all approach.
- It is interactive, allowing for the student to interact with their support rather than be a take-it-or-leave-it approach.
- It is motivational, informed by and uses both Self Theory and the Strengths Approach.

Simpson (2008) asserts that the PaMS student support model emphasises the need for customised student support, emphasising the individual student's strengths rather than their weaknesses (learning gaps). It should also allow students to connect with and provide feedback on the provided support. Furthermore, the support should also be motivational, highlighting students' accomplishments, stressing the need for perseverance and resilience, and emphasising the importance of learning from mistakes and progressing in their studies. Most significantly, the PaMS model encourages providing a wide range of non-academic support, which encourages collaboration and participation in the online community and focuses on identifying the student's strengths and their particular combination of abilities, experiences, and expectations.

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative case study research strategy (Merriam 2009; Yin 2014) was used to focus on a specific phenomenon, namely the provision of student support from the perspective of professional, administrative support staff who engaged with online post-graduate students enrolled in the business school at a mega university in South Africa. The study was based on document analysis (Bowen 2009), complemented with a focus-group that enabled the researchers to probe and triangulate the data. In addition, insights emerging from the analysis in evaluating the professional and administrative (non-academic) student support provided for post-graduate students enrolled in the business school of a mega university. The focus group enabled the researchers to gain a rich, "thick" description of the phenomenon in a way that brought a more precise understanding (Merriam 2009, 6). Emanating from the research aim of the study, the researchers were interested in gaining clarity on whether the curriculum took into account the unique characteristics of students, their aspirations and goals, and their socioeconomic backgrounds. The first step was to examine the following documents:

- Institutional Strategic Plan (Revised Strategic Plan 2022);
- Policies, procedures, and guidelines for programme approval, design and delivery (SER

2021);

- The self-evaluation report prepared for the 2021 programme peer reviews (SER 2021);
- The review outcome and quality improvement plan (QIP 2022); and
- Evaluation of impact and lifelong learning of a post-graduate qualification (Survey Report 2021).

The four levels of scaffolding for an individualised academic plan (Ludwig-Hardman and Dunlap 2003, 9), as well as the characteristics of Simpson's (2008) Proactive Motivational Support (PaMS) learning theory, guided the document analysis.

The second step of the study was a focus-group discussion with a selected group of academic and support staff members to validate the findings of the document analysis. This interview approach was chosen because it allowed the researchers to obtain particular information from the participants while also assisting the researchers by exploring and following up on ideas suggested by the participants. The interviewee selection for the focus group was convenient and purposeful (Merriam 2009). Participants were permanent academic and support staff at the business school. At least one representative from each academic and support directorate was invited to be a part of the focus-group. However, only four participants were available during the focus-group session. Informed consent was sought from the participants and was granted. Confidentiality and anonymity were also guaranteed for the participants. The staff members were assigned pseudonyms P1, P2, and more, with P standing for participants, as presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Staff members' brief biographical data

| # Staff members | | Gender (M/F) | Designation/ Responsibilities |
|-----------------|---------------|--------------|---|
| P1 | Participant 1 | M | Quality Assurance |
| P2 | Participant 2 | F | Teaching and Learning |
| P3 | Participant 3 | M | Professional and administrative support |
| P4 | Participant 4 | M | Academic support |

Source: Authors' construct

The researchers used the focus-group guide and follow-up questions with probes (Merriam 2009) to obtain information about the participants' perspectives on student support, specifically:

- a. What does non-academic (professional and administrative) student support in online learning mean to you?

- b. What type of non-academic support is available? What is not available that should be available?
- c. What do you understand by self-directed learning? What is your school doing in terms of teaching those skills to ensure that students are equipped for online learning?
- d. Do you agree with the statement that online students often feel isolated? If so, why? If not, why?

The focus-group lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes and was conducted via the Microsoft Teams platform. Discussions were recorded on MS Teams and later transcribed.

The data were analysed using the general inductive approach (Merriam 2009). The researchers identified data units as emerging concepts, topics, or phrases that formed common patterns. Drawing on the research questions, the researchers began by identifying the key concepts and themes and then jotting down in the margin, the ideas and thoughts that came to mind (Coffey and Atkinson 1996; Merriam 2009; Saldana 2016). The data were labelled based on the themes identified. Coded phrases, terms, and ideas from the data were written next to the appropriate data line or segments. Similar codes were reassembled to provide a more focused and comprehensive explanation. The themes were used to construct assertions by connecting them and noting how they relate to one another and what more extensive information they reveal regarding the study's research topics.

Triangulation (Denzin 2012; Fielding 2012) was achieved by involving academic and administrative support staff to validate the various perspectives and experiences revealed by the document analysis. To maintain rigour in this study, the team used iterative questioning, rephrasing questions as needed or continuing to ask participants when researchers felt they were not providing adequate information.

While qualitative study findings are very contextual, the transferability of this study's findings cannot be ruled out because the findings could benefit post-graduate students in different contexts. Moreover, the study is trustworthy since the information gained reflects the participants' experiences and perspectives rather than the researchers' opinions (Shenton 2004). The findings are described and illustrated using the participants' verbatim responses regarding confirmability. The analysis of the findings is discussed in the next section.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The document analysis results and the focus-group discussion were grouped into the following themes, as illustrated in Table 2.

Table 2: Themes distilled from content analysis and focus-group session

| Theme | Focus-group questions |
|--|-----------------------|
| Theme 1: Effective professional and administrative support | Questions a and b |
| Theme 2: Self-directed education | Question c |
| Theme 3: Isolation in Online Education | Question d |

Source: Authors' construct

In addition, Simpson's (2002; 2008) categories and characteristics for the Proactive Motivational Support Model (PaMS) were also used to analyse the results further. These are:

- advising: *giving information, exploring problems and suggesting directions;*
- assessment: *giving feedback to the individual on non-academic aptitudes and skills;*
- action: *practical help to promote studies;*
- advocacy: *making out a case for funding, writing a reference;*
- agitation: *promoting changes within the institution to benefit students;*
- Administration: *organising student support.*

Theme 1: Effective professional and administrative support

The results and discussion in Theme 1 emanated from the focus questions a and b (pages 101 and 102 of the article). The participants were asked to discuss their understanding of professional and administrative support, the types of available student support, and the types of support students ought to have access to. The following extracts showed that there appears to be a variety of support available:

“Well, if you look at the student walk ... from pre-registration, the support is, you know, at the level of information dissemination, explaining the programmes, explaining how the students are expected to participate. And then, of course, through the registration process, and then just before the academic journey can start formally, in other words, they actually start with the orientation and working towards a first assessment.” (P1).

“The student support in the non-academic sense can range from affective support, just listening to the students' problems and assisting them or making referrals. It could be assisting them with advice and financial support. ... So, therefore, I've kind of ranged it from anything from affective to academic to financial. And, maybe collectively, some kind of pastoral care that the students would be looking for along the learning journey.” (P1).

The above responses resonate with the following categories in the PaMS model, namely:

- advising: *giving information, exploring problems and suggesting directions;*
- administration: *organising student support.*

The responses also highlight the blending of academic and non-academic support, as shown by Participant 1: “Even though we say non-academic, it could also be things which actually support the academic learning journey”. Participant 1 stated, “Academic and support service should function [together]; it is an engagement”.

The document analysis also revealed resonance with the PaMS model. According to the self-evaluation report (SER 2021), students have access to administrative support, library support, and Information and Communication Technology (ICT) support (PaMS advising and administration). Regarding administrative support, the SER stated the following:

“One administrative staff member is dedicated to supporting students and academics/lecturers with all the programme content modules, while the other one is supporting students, research module leader and supervisors with the research module related activities. There are two dedicated librarians who orientate students on library usage and resources.”

Furthermore, concerning ICT support:

“ICT software is distributed to the students on campus, and it is also shared on the cloud. Two technicians are dedicated to assist students with the installation of the software on their laptops. In the event students are unable to come to the school, software links are posted on the learning management system (LMS) and sent to students through emails. Telephonic IT support is also provided for those who are struggling with the installation of software. The school ICT Helpdesk support students with access to the LMS in the event students encounter challenges.”

The comments from participants support the evidence in the self-evaluation report. The following were highlighted by the participants when asked what kind of non-academic support ought to be available but is not:

“I’m just thinking of a child from a rural area where there’s no connectivity, and stuff. And I think as a as an ODeL institution, how do we support such a child? I know that the university is doing something about it, but from the school point of view, we are not familiar with what support such students are getting.”

The above response speaks to PaMS’s criterion, agitation (promoting institutional changes to benefit students). P4 explained that support for students from rural areas is not available and should be and that the school should “reach out to them and support them”. Furthermore, there is limited information on financial and dedicated support for students with disabilities (P1). The responses from P4 and P1 refer to the following PaMS criteria, namely: (i) action (practical help to promote study), (ii) advocacy (making out a case for funding, writing a reference), and

(iii) agitation (promoting changes within the institution to benefit students).

The participants also noted the need for a more compelling online support system, notably a call centre functionality that can document and redirect calls to the relevant people. The existing arrangement was said to be “bottlenecking the entire academic project,” as the “frustration of one student can affect the morale of all students, and even the retention of some students in the system” (P2). Furthermore, participants stated that the learning management platform could be used more effectively by “including more digital materials, such as e-textbooks and other reading material” (P3). The need for significantly greater pre-registration diagnosis to help with the provision of “quite varied support to different levels of care” was noted by P1. This is an area for consideration in the follow-up study.

Theme 2: Self-directed learning

The discussion in theme 2 emanated from question (c) on page 102 of this article. Self-directed learning, collaboration, and networking were identified as significant critical cross-field outcomes for post-graduate students in the section on course content for programme approval in the self-evaluation report (SER 2021), namely:

- “Work and interact effectively with others as a team, group, organisation or community member.”
- “Organise and manage themselves and their activities responsibly and effectively. Learn About the CAPS Curriculum | Think Digital Academy. [Students] will be self-directed and able to act autonomously in planning and implementing projects.”

This resonates with PaMS *administration* (organising student support), assessment (giving feedback to the individual on non-academic aptitudes and skills) and action (practical help to promote study). However, the following excerpts suggest that students are not as self-directed as presumed. P1 said, “It is almost ironic since we’re talking about digital natives, and you’d expect them to be, you know, pretty savvy and switched on”. The lofty objectives mentioned in course designs do not seem to be carried over to the delivery stage, as evidenced by the focus-group.

“I think it’s of importance to me, seeing them being able to navigate our systems without asking, [for example] ‘How do I claim my myLife account? How do I access myModule? How do ... How do ...’ You know? I think that’s the big [problem]. ... we run study schools at the college, and I see a whole lot of [those] questions coming up.” (P4).

P2 summarised self-directed learning as “working in groups, projects, and portfolios where they

take ownership of their learning in order to best complete their studies on time”.

P1 seemed to concur with P4 regarding the assumptions made about post-graduate students in the online learning environment.

“Just this week I pointed out to [my colleague] when we ran orientation programmes and just listening to the comments and reading the comments of students, you actually get quite alarmed, you know. Some students are [asking]: Where do I find this? How do I get this? How do I download? Etcetera. That tells me that that there are some students, you know, where some of the most basic vital literacy skills [are] missing.” (P1).

P1 argued that the schooling system socialises people into this whole dependency syndrome – “give me, give me, give me” and that this is possibly one of the reasons for students not being self-directed. P1 claimed that “you’re [perceived to] only [be] a good teacher if you spoon-feed”, and that students rebel against those teachers who promote critical thinking. Students appear to perform well with group projects but struggle with the research module, which calls for independent study, was also brought up.

The survey on the Evaluation and Impact of Lifelong Learning Post-graduate Courses (Survey Report 2021) also refers to group projects as a tool for collaboration and networking. According to the survey results, most respondents said yes when students were asked if the collaboration or connections they made throughout their studies opened up new business or career chances. However, most respondents claimed that networking, as a result of group projects, had not led to any new business or employment prospects. The survey concluded that the friendships (collaborations) students made during their studies had little to no bearing on professional advancement. This highlighted the need for more targeted course planning and design to encourage cooperation, networking, and self-directed learning. The peer reviewers’ comments in the programme reviews for 2021 supported the survey outcomes. In addition, the document analysis revealed the following areas for improvement in course design and delivery as suggested by the peer review panel in 2021 (QIP 2022):

- “Relook at the structured research group supervision approach and refine the structured research groups to inculcate a culture of independent research capacity among students.”
- “Demonstrate collaborative learning in the postgraduate programme. Develop modules with teaching and learning materials that ensure consistent inclusion of group activity in all the modules to develop social competence and create substantial interaction among students.”
- “The school must work towards eliminating the challenge associated with self-study.”
- “Lecturers must provide detailed feedback to students.”

The responses from the participants seemed to suggest that the school had addressed the above comments by the review panel, which was corroborated in the quality improvement plan (QIP 2022). According to the quality improvement plan for the 2021 peer review, the integrated research module has been restructured, and the structured research approach has been altered. In addition, synchronous contact hours have been implemented to balance independent study and interaction with lecturers, company practitioners and other students. This is an area for future research.

Theme 3: Isolation in Online Learning

The results for theme 3 emanated from question (d) on page 102 of this article. When asked whether they agreed with the statement that online students often feel isolated, the participants did not agree. The participants appeared to agree that the school ensures that students feel they are a part of the group. Study schools and mentors were mentioned to assist students on their learning journey. Additionally, it was reported that students exchanged contact information “so that they can bounce ideas with one another as they go along”. The extract below affirmed the general opinion of the groups that students do not feel isolated.

“So most of our programmes got that element of having to do the assignment in groups, and then the mentor comes in handy. And they [students] don’t feel isolated ... only when they have to do they are exams, they have to work as individuals.” (P2)

The participants claimed that students do not feel isolated because there are many opportunities for them to work together. When probed about the comment that “students seem lost” (P1), the group indicated that this does not refer to feelings of isolation. The participants seemed to equate working individually with working alone and did not see any reason for students to feel isolated. The fact that they mentioned that some students “seem lost” was not seen to be related to students feeling isolated.

The study was limited to a small sample of professional administrative support staff of a business school at a distance-learning university in South Africa. The next phase of the study will include focus groups with students, academic staff, and support staff at other business schools that offer online post-graduate studies. In addition, it will examine “the extent to which the principle of open learning can be personalised”, as highlighted by the review panel that conducted the institutional audit at this university (CHE 2022, 67). More importantly, future studies should evaluate the effectiveness of the institutional strategic objective of strengthening student support services as a foundational component of the academic project to assess student satisfaction from a variety of angles, including expectations, perceptions of the university, perceived quality of offerings and services, perceived value, and loyalty (Revised Strategic Plan

2022).

CONCLUSION

The study underscored the significance and role of professional and administrative student support in promoting success in online post-graduate studies. It provided significant information about the value of individualised professional and administrative student support in encouraging post-graduate students to become successful self-directed students in an online learning community. The study revealed a lack of motivational aspects of student support and a need to be emphasised in planning and managing support for post-graduate students. It also became evident from the engagements with professional and administrative staff that little has been done for students from remote areas and those with disabilities. Most importantly, the study underscored that student support providers presumed that post-graduate students were a homogenous group prepared to succeed in online learning communities. This notion was not confirmed in this study.

Contrary to this, it was established that some students feel “lost,” emphasising the loneliness they experience in online or remote learning contexts. In particular, the results affirmed the importance of Simpson’s Proactive Motivational Support (PaMS) learning theory in the planning, designing and implementing support for online post-graduate studies, namely, that the support should be individualised, interactive, and motivational. Further research is encouraged to investigate if a more individualised approach to student support may motivate post-graduate students to become successful self-directed students in an online learning community. The conclusion from this study is that a targeted departmental approach and integrated inter- and intra-institutional collaboration are required to improve self-directed learning and success in online post-graduate courses and foster a sense of belonging and community in online learning contexts.

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