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***HUMAN-CENTRED SUCCESS IN DISTANCE LEARNING: EXPLORING
ENGAGEMENT, RESILIENCE, AND MOTIVATION IN SOUTH AFRICAN
PRIVATE HIGHER EDUCATION***

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ABSTRACT

According to (Amoah & Le Roux, 2024; Gunter, 2025; Kibe & Smith, 2024; Patel & Rafolane, 2024), despite steady gains in distance student throughput rates at South African private higher education institutions, retention challenges persist due to students' isolation, technical barriers, and work-study demands, particularly in distance learning contexts. With this statement in mind, this qualitative case study aims to explore the behavioural, emotional, contextual and support-related factors enabling academic success, particularly among high-achieving distance learning students, with the aim of using this exploration to recommend human-centred strategies to enhance retention and equity. The study draws on several seminal theorists, such as Tinto's retention theory (1993), Kahu and Nelson's engagement framework (2024), Moore's transactional distance theory (1997), Deci & Ryan's self-determination theory (2000), and Zimmerman's self-regulated learning model (2002). All seminal sources are strengthened through recent studies on the same theories and frameworks. Employing a case study design at Inscape's Distance Learning Campus, data were collected from high-achieving students via an asynchronous online questionnaire, adapted from a planned focus group. The questionnaire incorporated the Rose-Thorn-Bud reflection model (Forrester-Bowling et al., 2025) and a demographic survey, with thematic analysis, identifying key themes: intrinsic motivation, self-regulation through strict planning, emotional resilience amid isolation, informal support, and institutional gaps. Findings align with self-determination theory, emphasising autonomy and competence, and highlight the need to reduce transactional distance through formalised structured support. Recommendations include a dedicated online student community, software guidance, and empathetic communication to boost engagement. Limitations include the small sample, potential self-selection bias, and lack of interactive focus group data. Future research could explore larger samples, mixed methods, and longitudinal tracking to validate findings across multiple design programmes.

KEYWORDS: Distance Learning, Student Success, Motivation, Self-regulation, Engagement, Human-Centred Design.

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INTRODUCTION & BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

Distance learning has become an essential mode of education worldwide, offering flexibility and access for learners who might otherwise be excluded from traditional classroom settings (Kuluşaklı, 2025). The distance mode of education also presents distinct challenges, particularly regarding student motivation, self-regulation, and experience of academic isolation (Amoah & Le Roux, 2024; Lobos et al., 2024). These challenges are often intensified in under-resourced contexts, such as South Africa, where systemic inequalities and digital divides persist (Enwereji & Van Rooyen, 2025; Mateko et al., 2025).

Recent studies, including those of Kuluşaklı (2025) and Yang et al. (2025), emphasise the emotional and psychological demands placed on online learners, underlining a critical need to understand what factors contribute to student success in these environments. Against this backdrop, despite historically low pass rates in Higher Certificate programmes (~42%), emerging data from Inscape, a private higher education institute in South Africa, shows promising progress, with certain programmes and cohorts achieving significantly higher success rates. This institution, Inscape Education Group, focuses on design education, which inherently demands levels of creativity, technical skill, and visual communication competencies, and presents a particularly complex context for distance learning delivery. The interaction of creative pedagogy with online learning modalities possibly creates unique challenges and opportunities.

This study seeks to explore the human-centred elements, such as engagement, resilience, and motivation, that potentially drive these successes, aiming to uncover insights that can inform and enhance distance learning practices at the institution, but also the larger South African private higher education landscape.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Despite the research on attrition in online learning, ongoing investigation is required to address the gap in understanding the experiences and success determinants of high-performing distance learners, particularly within South African private higher education (Enwereji & Van Rooyen,

2025). Most studies have concentrated on why students are unsuccessful and drop out, but little attention has been given to those who excel in the distance learning environment and who have developed strategies for success. This study aims to explore this gap by investigating what motivators, support systems, and self-management strategies contribute to the success of these high-achieving distance students. By focusing on the positive drivers of success, this research seeks to generate insights that can inform tailored interventions to enhance learner engagement and outcomes in South African private institutions.

The primary research question seeks to discover the key behavioural, emotional, and contextual factors that enable academic persistence and high performance among high-achieving distance learning students. The secondary questions support the primary question by delving into specific contexts. The questions look at the lived experiences of high-achieving students at the private higher education institution's distance campus. The research assesses the role that support structures play in fostering autonomy and contributing to the success of high-achieving students. Finally, it looks at whether the future of support and engagement strategies could enhance a human-centred success framework for distance learning students in the context of South African private higher education.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review synthesises recent research and foundational theories to frame behavioural, emotional, contextual, and support-related elements of persistence and performance, aligning with human-centred design principles that prioritise empathy and iterative solutions for student success (Alvarado, 2025). Four key areas are examined: student retention and engagement literature establishes the current landscape of challenges and identifies patterns that may explain differential outcomes; transactional distance and isolation research explores how successful students navigate the inherent disconnection of online learning; self-regulation and motivation studies reveal the internal mechanisms that drive sustained performance; and human-centred design with virtual communities examines how institutional support structures can foster belonging and achievement. Together, these areas provide a comprehensive framework for understanding why certain students thrive in distance learning environments where others struggle, grounding the study in both local South African contexts and global distance education research.

Student Retention and Engagement in Distance Learning

Student retention remains a critical challenge in distance education, particularly in South Africa, where throughput rates often lag due to socioeconomic and infrastructural barriers (Branson & Whitelaw, 2024; Enwereji & Van Rooyen, 2025; Mazrui *et al.*, 2022; Moodley *et al.*, 2023).

Tinto's seminal retention model (1993, as cited in Kibe & Smith, 2024) emphasises social and academic integration as predictors of persistence. In South African private and public institutions, retention studies highlight the role of flexible engagement in mitigating dropout risks, with unexpectedly high retention in fully online programs due to tailored support and student agency (Levin *et al.*, 2025).

Kahu's recently updated engagement framework (2024), mentioned by Picton & Baik (2024), which expands on the earlier model framing student engagement (Kahu, 2013), emphasising emotional, cognitive pathways in digital contexts, is particularly relevant for employed students balancing studies with work.

Lobos *et al.* (2024) further contextualise retention in South Africa, identifying work-study balance and access as critical factors for academic performance, while mentioning effective self-regulation in terms of emotional, digital and distraction management skills development.

These studies collectively suggest that engagement, both behavioural, for example, time management, and emotional, for example, the sense of belonging, are pivotal for high-achieving distance learners, framing this study's exploration of success factors.

Transactional Distance and Isolation Challenges

Moore's theory of transactional distance (1997) argues that psychological and communication gaps between students, facilitators, and peers hinder distance education outcomes, a challenge amplified in South Africa by digital divides and resource constraints (Mateko *et al.*, 2025; Gunter, 2025; Ajani, 2024).

Abuhassna & Alnawajha's (2023) review based on transactional distance motivates a degree of structure with less interaction to foster autonomy. The review promotes learning with more and regular involved connections, which reduces psychological isolation. These connections could be

in the form of learning material, technology and interactivity. Enwereji & Van Rooyen (2025) support the provided structure through various methods of instruction, courseware design, and support to enable community building interactions and relationship building to improve on skills development, feedback, and counselling interactions.

Gunter (2025) frames the realities of geographical and material differences influencing students' realities on educational experiences, while Mateko *et al.* (2025) highlight the economic, social and cultural inequalities found in South Africa. Inequalities in transactional distance or geographical distance create isolation, and socio-economic, are contextual barriers aligning with this study's focus on discovering support structures to mitigate psychological gaps in support for high achievers.

Self-Determination and Motivation

Deci & Ryan (2000) argue that the assumption that self-determination theory is intrinsic motivation, driven by autonomy, competence, and relatedness, which are all related to previous human need theories, which emphasise the necessity of specific ongoing needs for academic persistence and performance. Student engagement is influenced by social support, which Yang *et al.* (2025) argues is a predictor for relatedness as one of the three basic psychological needs of students in distance online education. The other two needs are identified as competence and autonomy.

Albay and Eisma (2021, cited by Alvarado (2025) outlined the benefits of design thinking and innovation in student-centred facilitation in learning environments conducive to dynamic and productive participation and collaboration in the educational process, which allows for autonomy and stimulation of creativity throughout the process. Many of the researchers listed by Alvarado (2025), speaks to the benefits of a design thinking context of pedagogical approaches and methodologies. Where learning through reflection and failures occurs, in spite of the complex challenges in collaboration and practical exploration online.

Zimmerman's self-regulated learning model (2002), emphasising goal-setting and time management, remains relevant in online contexts. Faza & Lestari (2025) highlight "organising thoughts, emotions, and actions to achieve objectives", through self-regulated strategies such as goal-setting, cognitive and metacognitive processes, time management, self-reflection, help-

seeking, monitoring, and task management, which align with high achievers' effective scheduling and planning (Kuluşaklı, 2025).

These studies highlight the interplay of intrinsic motivation and self-regulation, grounding this study's investigation of high-achievers' persistence strategies.

Human-Centred Design and Virtual Communities

Human-centred design, rooted in empathy and creative problem solving (Brown & Katz, 2015; Liedtka, 2015), offers a lens for reimagining distance education support. Defines design thinking as a user-centred approach, and an active teaching methodology. This approach improves the student experience by fostering collaboration, reflection, and learning from failures, which cultivates professional growth and equips students with innovative thinking needed for future challenges.

Enwereji & Van Rooyen suggest that communities of practice should be formed for building relationships and establishing clear communication, which is to the point, incorporating concrete examples. Drawing on the social presence aspect of Garrison's (2007) Community of Inquiry framework, Gökoğlu *et al.* (2024) reiterated that collaborative online learning communities are crucial for creating meaningful experiences where students feel valued and connected.

The literature review synthesises recent research to contextualise the experiences of high-achieving distance learners, linking global and South African perspectives on retention, isolation, motivation and design-driven solutions. Furthermore, it provides a robust foundation for exploring the behavioural, emotional, and contextual factors that enable student persistence. The review highlighted gaps in situational support that this study aims to address through qualitative insights and actionable recommendations.

RESEARCH DESIGN METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative case study design to explore the lived experiences and success factors of high-achieving distance learning students at Inscape Education Group's Distance Learning Campus, a South African private higher education institution specialising in design fields. The approach centres on the 2023 cohort of the Higher Certificate in Architectural Technology programme, where low throughput rates improved modestly from 42% to 50% but

throughput rates depicted a curious pattern of high-achieving students, reflecting broader retention challenges in South African online learning (Amoah & Le Roux, 2024; Patel & Rafolane, 2024; Kibe & Smith, 2024; Gunter, 2025). This cohort was distinguished by a subgroup that demonstrated notably high levels of achievement, which initiated the exploration of this study.

A qualitative methodology is appropriate for uncovering nuanced behavioural, emotional and contextual insights, aligning with recent calls for student-centred research in distance education (Mwange *et al.*, 2023). The design is informed by human-centred processes (Alvarado, 2025), emphasising empathy in exploring personalised learning journeys. Data collection was adapted from the originally planned 90-minute semi-structured focus group sessions due to scheduling constraints among distance participants, shifting dialogue to an asynchronous online questionnaire. This study employed structured survey questions, combined with open-ended questions on experiences and was complemented by a short demographic review for contextualisation.

The Rose-Thorn-Bud (RTB) reflection model (Forrester-Bowling *et al.*, 2025) guided prompts, capturing positives (“roses”), difficulties (“thorns”), and improvement (“buds”), while design thinking tools, for example, empathy mapping, informed questions framing to elicit human-centred insight (Alvarado, 2025).

Ethical considerations included informed consent, anonymity, and voluntary participation, approved by Inscape’s research committee. Data were analysed thematically (Mwange *et al.*, 2023).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The key finding from the thematic analysis of questionnaire data collected from five high-achieving distance learning participants in Inscape Education Group’s 2023 cohort, primarily from the Higher Certificate in Architectural Technology and related design programmes. Data was coded inductively (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009), revealing patterns in participant background, experiences, motivations, challenges, and reflections. Findings are presented thematically with integration of the Rose-Thorn-Bud (RTB) model (Forrester-Bowling *et al.*, 2025), followed by a discussion linking findings to recent literature on retention, transactional distance, self-

determination, self-regulated learning, and human-centred design in South African distance education.

Motivation and emotional resilience amid isolation align with the transactional distance theory updates (Abuhassna & Alnawajha, 2023), as it seemed that WhatsApp group interactions between peers reduce psychological gaps, which Yang *et al.* (2025) referred to as relatedness amongst peers. Students' calls for formalised communities echo community of inquiry frameworks to address the sense of belonging within the *social presence* (Gökoğlu *et al.*, 2024; Enwereji & Van Rooyen).

Intrinsic motivation and persistence, driven by career goals, support self-determination theory (Yang *et al.*, 2025), while self-regulated strategies like scheduling reflect contemporary learning models (Faza & Lestari, 2025).

Mixed excitement and nervousness marked the start, with under preparedness for self-directed learning and design software tools like AutoCAD/Revit. Key milestones and moments of confidence were highlighted through assignment completions, experiential training, and software mastery, as well as building pride and professionalism through feedback and independence (Enwereji & Van Rooyen, 2025).

Technical challenges and courseware flaws highlight digital inequalities (Mateko *et al.*, 2025; Enwereji & Van Rooyen, 2025), underscoring the need for empathic, human-centred designs (Brown & Katz, 2015; Liedtka, 2015). Technical skills gaps, coursework, assignment misalignment, untimely feedback, and work-study stress caused frustration and burnout. Emotional isolation and unsupportive institutional responses were prevalent. Strategies and tools were identified as strict scheduling, supplementary resources (for example, YouTube), and study plans were effective, though software self-teaching and material flaws (for example, typographical errors in courseware) posed frustrations.

RTB reflections provide actionable insights, aligning with participatory co-design (Forrester-Bowling *et al.*, 2025). The RTB analysis from high-achieving distance learning students highlighted strengths (roses) like career-driven motivations, flexible and creative assignments, peer WhatsApp support, constructive feedback, effective time management, family-supported

resilience, and online resource access. Challenges (thorns) include technical software struggles, isolation, poor institutional engagement, delayed communication, work-study balance issues, procrastination, stress and flawed course materials. Opportunities (buds) suggest formal peer groups, mentoring, software guidance, empathetic communication, self-regulation tools, mental health support, improved course content, better digital tools, detailed assessment briefs, and industry networking.

High-achieving students demonstrate success through intrinsic motivation, self-regulation and informal support, despite technical challenges, isolation and institutional gaps. These findings mirror retention challenges (Enwereji & Van Rooyen, 2025) and underscore the need for empathic, human-centred interventions like formal communities and enhanced communication to boost throughput and personalise learning experiences.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To address the retention challenge and enhance the academic success of distance learning students at Inscape Education Group's Distance Learning Campus, this study offers practical and theoretical recommendations.

Practical recommendations include the establishment of dedicated online student communities through online discussion forums, group projects, and virtual study groups to mitigate isolation (Achuthan *et al.*, 2024). Abuhassna & Alnawajha (2023) discuss dialogue and conversation to minimise transactional distance and to foster peer interaction.

Targeted guidance on software design software, like AutoCAD and Revit, integrated into self-paced courseware, would address technical challenges and support self-regulated learning (Faza & Lestari, 2025; Yang *et al.*, 2025). Additionally, regular empathetic check-ins and clearer assignment instructions with timely feedback would counter transactional responses, boosting engagement and retention (Branson & Whitelaw, 2024; Kibe & Smith, 2024).

Theoretical recommendations include refinement of engagement models for South African private higher education, developing an engagement framework incorporating findings on informal support and resilience, tailored to distance education study contexts of work-study balance, and integration of human-centred design in retention strategies (Alvarado, 2025),

through the implementation of the “bud” feedback in the RTB reflection (Forrester-Bowling *et al.*, 2024).

Overall, findings affirm that while self-motivation enables success, institutional enhancements could bridge gaps (Gunter, 2025; Ajani, 2024), contributing to personalised engagement in South African private higher education (Scheepers & Van den Berg, 2023; Ajani, 2024).

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Human-centred exploration of high-achieving distance learning students at Inscape Education Group’s Distance Learning Campus reveals that academic success in South African private higher education is driven by intrinsic career motivation, self-regulated strategies, emotional resilience, and informal support from peers and family, despite institutional challenges like poor communication and technical barriers. Addressing the primary research question, key behavioural, emotional, and contextual factors enable persistence and performance. Also evidenced by participants’ RTB reflections and the themes of flexibility, support, and routines were highly valued.

Limitations of the study, include the small sample size, potential self-selection bias, and the lack of interactive focus group dynamics, which may reduce the depth of participants’ shared experiences. This methodology effectively captured reflective narratives from high-achievers, revealing themes of resilience and informal support that inform the subsequent findings and practical recommendations for enhancing retention in South African private higher education.

Future recommendations encompass expanding to larger, mixed-method studies, piloting proposed interventions like dedicated online student communities, and design software guidance and clearer assessment instructions. Furthermore, by incorporating longitudinal monitoring and evaluating to refine human-centred support frameworks, ultimately enhancing equity and retention in distance education.

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