

There is a considerable body of literature outlining potential differences in the performance of students undertaking distance education courses as compared to traditional classroom courses; see, for example, Neal (1998), Taylor (1998); Wetzel, Radtke, and Stern (1994), Storck and Sproull (1995), and Hara and Kling (1999). In general, these studies indicate that there are no significant differences in achievement and the satisfaction of students in distance education classes when compared to the more traditional modes of delivery. It should be noted, however, that finding empirically based research specifically related to online distance education is difficult, no doubt partly due to the recent nature of such delivery (see also, Schell, 2001). A number of studies do provide some indication of student perceptions of online distance education (Hara & Kling, 1999; Hiltz, 1997; Hornby & Anderson, 1995; Hsu and Backhouse 2001; Pear & Novak, 1996; Stahlman, 1996). In general, the benefits identified by students include convenience and flexibility, greater motivation to work, learning more and greater understanding of the course material, higher quality of education, better access to and communication with the professor, more communication with other students, and more active participation in discussion. Some also liked the unlimited access to self-assessment and immediate and extensive feedback. There has also been work done in relation to the Technology Acceptance Model (see, in particular, Cheung, Lee, & Chen, 2001), which indicated that perceived usefulness had the greatest effect on the behavioural intentions of students.

Against this, the following problems were identified (the overlap is intentional; different studies reported different findings): a high level of frustration and dissatisfaction, lower levels of satisfaction, technical and logistical problems, lack of interaction with the professor, difficulty in developing student friendships, more likely to stop “attending” and fall behind, lack of feedback and confusion about what was required, overwhelming amounts of reading from e-mail and online discussion, less interesting, and students less likely to ask questions. Recent work on collaborative technologies in education (Murthy, 2004) also draws attention to potential problems in the use of such technologies.