ENHANCING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF STUDENT FEEDBACK AND SUPPORT IN A DISTANCE LEARNING CONTEXT

FINAL REPORT

Project team: Marion Dadds; Chris Kynch; Fiona Lawson; Jenny Mackness (St Martin's College)

Table of contents

BACKGROUND

The project was initiated by a team who are responsible for an innovative modular flexible distance learning course leading initially to the Post Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE). The course has proved increasingly popular with students and, perhaps because it was innovative, generated interest from the media and the TTA as well as other educational institutions. Although successful courses leading to qualified teacher status for Secondary school teachers have long been offered by the Open University, primary courses have proved more challenging, and notably an Ofsted report lead to programme closure. Because of the success of the Secondary courses, it is clearly possible to assure the quality of school placements. However there are distinctive challenges for smaller schools, schools which are geographically distant from the higher education provider, and schools which are thinly spread over remote rural areas. One or more of these characteristics tend to be typical of primary schools. One of the reasons for the successful launch, from Ambleside, of the distance learning course which was studied by the research project, was the innovative approaches of the college to ensure consistent, high quality primary school placements for student teachers in small, geographically dispersed schools which are typical of North Lancashire and Cumbria.

The research project worked with the earliest cohorts, so that students experienced rapid developments in the shape, design and delivery of the programme and constituent parts, and also the very fast learning curve of tutors and programme leaders as they engaged with the emerging challenges of ‘blended learning’ at a distance. The interviews, especially of students from the first cohort, reflect this formation stage, and how at the start the programme was engaging with both distance and technology mediated learning. The experience of developing the course and the early challenges is likely to be of interest to others who are embarking ‘from scratch’ in this field. However, distance learning and technology mediated learning may take many forms, making it difficult to draw comparisons between different courses and contexts. Our evidence is grounded and reflects how student experience is shaped by local capacity, for example how far teacher educators are experienced in the technology or appropriate pedagogies and this is a hidden variable within institutions.

Identification of issues

The project team including researchers developed a programme of action research to reveal in depth how well the course was working for students and to identify where and how improvements might be made. The project drew on the processing of data by local professionals, and has been validated by their expertise.

Prior to the project, the team and student representative initially identified a number of issues through individual and group activities and plenaries.

A research day to generate data on such issues was arranged for students and staff. It involved individual reflection and 'streams of consciousness' followed by small group analysis by student and staff separately. A 'helpful' and 'unhelpful' matrix was built up by staff and students shared by presentation and discussion of the different views of how improvements could be made.

- Isolation seemed an important issue for some students, contrary to the expectations of those teacher educators who considered that students attracted to distance learning courses would be self motivated individuals who preferred to study with minimal contact, or might be trying to avoid interaction because of family responsibilities.
- Inconsistency of support on school placements appeared to be a potential source of concern. Their geographical dispersion suggested that placements could be isolated despite the college 'cluster' policy for building school-college links.
- The increasing part played by web based resources and electronic communications raised questions about how these were accessed by students and how they might best meet student needs.
- The effects of changing the balance between face to face and other communications may not be well understood. It was hypothesised that face to face contact might be a prior condition for forming relationships critical for subsequently developing technology mediated communications. Although there are models in use, such as a 'buddy' system it was not clear in what ways camaraderie would be considered desirable or how could be enhanced to meet the varied needs of distance learners.

The data was taken forward anonymously by the research team using 'surprise' analysis; 'issues' analysis; 'meaning chunks' to inform a strategy for development of the direction of the research. The generic nature of feedback and support for students emerged as a key issue and it was selected as the focus for the research. The proposed research programme was developed at subsequent meetings around the central issue 'How can we make feedback for students more effective - to reduce isolation, increase confidence and enhance the formation of teaching capability'. Evidence was sought to deepen understanding of underlying issues.

The research aimed to provide evidence which could be used to facilitate the delivery of improvements. This implied consideration of disparity of student views on issues; a sense of moving towards a common goal, the roles of key professionals and other resource boundaries. The project included overlapping 'phases' of data gathering from key players in order to deepen understanding. This approach is seen also as enhancing validity of the data. The project team has met on an ongoing basis to share views about the delivery of improvements, and this has enabled the expertise of the programme leaders to make a valued contribution to interpreting the data and to developing the course in the light of findings. Individual and group activities have been designed to provide insights into how changes in feedback and support are working.

METHOD

Action research cycle

The research has been taken forward in an action research 'cycle' which provides validation in development by the key players who bring their own expertise and understanding to bear on the process. The semi-structured interviews with students and key professionals in college and partnership schools has provided rich data relating to the research questions and to identifying the improvements which are most readily achievable. A triangulated perspective has been generated from the interview sources.

Students from Cohort 1 and 2

Twenty six in depth semi-structured telephone interviews were conducted with students from cohort one, including six drop-outs. Attempts were made to contact all qualifiers from the cohort. There were no refusals and very few could not be contacted. Twenty five interviews were similarly conducted with students from the second cohort, including two drop-outs. The initial sample was random with quota sampling for students who were geographically distant from college including local city 'concentrations'. The semi-structured interview guide was designed in consultation with the research team, but the interviews were all carried out by research staff to preserve anonymity and encourage openness of expression. For example, information emerged about the varied problems some students had encountered with computers at home. One allegedly could not access the internet because of geographical location; another had to climb into a cupboard to use the computer; small 'glitches' in understanding had delayed coursework by weeks; skills had been forgotten since qualifying. Since the lack of these problems was a pre-condition of the course, students may have been reluctant as individuals to divulge problems. Anonymity also enabled criticisms of individual staff to be coalesced into perspectives of an underlying problem which could then be addressed. The interview tapes were transcribed and analysed using Atlasti. This enabled the frequency of similar references from separate interviews to be assessed; clusters of associated references and counterfactuals to be identified.

Questionnaire survey

A student questionnaire was designed to gather further quantitative data on the issues emerging from analysis of interviews. It was intended that this would help to show the order of importance of issues for students and the use of a five point Likert scale would indicate the issues on which student views were especially disparate. The aim was to gather questionnaire responses from at least 2 other institutions offering distance learning courses leading to qualified teacher status for Primary teaching. This would enable us to identify common findings across institutions, which would help to assess the robustness of the evidence.

We were advised that a paper questionnaire to be completed by home students at the end of the course in their own time would be likely to have a very low response rate. The programme leader suggested that all attendees at a final base day should be asked to fill it in as part of the activities. One of the information technology tutors kindly changed the format of the questionnaire and placed it on her website. This part of the survey was completed electronically by 29 students.

In order to secure sufficient completed questionnaires from other institutions, information was sought about distance learning course for primary student teachers at other higher education institutions. Numbers on each course were small, but it was decided not to enlarge the scope to include secondary student teachers, because of the potential importance of the primary placement experience. All providers were approached and asked if they would agree to their students taking part. There was an unexpected snag. Student names and contact details could not be released to our team by another institution. This meant that we could not undertake the administrative work of posting, monitoring and reminding non-responders ourselves: this would have to be undertaken by the other institutions. There was not the necessary willingness to do this.

We had, however, the web based questionnaire, which could be accessed directly by students from another institution. The programme leaders at these institutions would be able to forward our request to students to fill in the questionnaire by e-mail, a relatively quick and easy task. Nevertheless there was a reluctance to take part, possibly because of different data protection suspicions, except for course leaders at two institutions, where there was

personal acquaintance. The total number of students responding was 18, 17 from one other higher education institution. The tutor whose website hosted the survey took sick leave and can no longer be contacted. The website unexpectedly disappeared, along with the electronic questionnaire. So additional responses could no longer be sought. This experience of attempted collaboration between institutions should be noted by others.

Because of the low response, the questionnaire survey results are indicative only. However, the pattern of responses in the two cohorts are not dissimilar, both in relation to the mean score and also to the extent of differences between students within each group. Such patterns may be associated with either student or course characteristics.

School mentors

Twenty five semi-structured interviews were designed, conducted and analysed, using atlasti, with mentors from partnership schools, with quota sampling for schools markedly distant from college. The mentor interviews tended to be shorter than those of students or tutors. The clustered responses could provide material for training courses for mentors, for programmes of continuing professional development, or initial teacher education. The report includes diagrams for clarification and illustration accordingly; or for website adaptation.

Tutors involved in delivering the programme in the higher education provider

Eleven semi-semi-structured interviews were designed, conducted and analysed, using atlasti, with staff delivering the course from college, with quota sampling across roles. The diversity of perspective and professional insights provided an added opportunity to explore networks of observations and insights. Mindmaps were deduced from interviews with two tutors who held partially irreconcilable views about the balance of benefits of technology mediated learning. These diagrams could be used for coursework materials.

EVIDENCE: STUDENT INTERVIEWS

Support and feedback on the course

Whatever students saw as support and feedback was deemed important, sometimes pivotally so by almost all interviewees. Only a handful of interviewees appeared to fit the autonomous self sufficient learner image: feedback and support were important to them. Many indicated that 'isolation' was inevitable but undesirable on a distance learning course. For those who had already taken an OU course, and to varying extents among others, isolation was part of the package and to varying extents and in different ways was seen as stressful. Interviewees expressed emotions (such as a sense of 'walking round like a headless chicken trying to work it out on your own', 'staying calm', or just loneliness such as feeling 'is there someone out there?'; 'it's wonderful independence that you've got to get on with your work but it felt as if you were being sort of set adrift') as well as effectiveness in following the course, such as knowing if they were working along the 'right lines'. Interviewees may have interpreted the words 'support' and 'feedback' in different ways, but the use of both words, as the interview data confirmed, allowed them to feel comfortable talking holistically about what they felt, including for example about communication with peers; informal as well as formal aspects; formative and summative assessment. The perceptions of the experience of the technology mediation of the course were specifically sought, although since the interviews, pedagogies tailored to e-learning have been increasingly embedded in the programme.
Main findings included the following:

Written feedback

- The coursework itself provided some inbuilt feedback ('the course material they've written, the core subjects, are fantastic, they're very interactive, very useful, very of the moment'). Detailed and constructive feedback on coursework (written assignments and essays) was considered necessary by most students in order to progress and succeed ('they directed you back into certain parts of the unit where they felt that you hadn't quite hit the target which was great').

- Support at the start of the course was the most important ('a steep learning curve part of the course really when you're becoming familiar with all the new terminology and all the documentation'). But it was also seen as necessary throughout ('you're doing something completely different so you do need constructive feedback all the way through'; 'you're working in isolation you often question whether you're doing it right and whether you're progressing'). There was concern about being along the right lines and the guidance needed to be provided soon enough to be drawn on for subsequent coursework. Concern could arise from confrontation with unfamiliar subjects; time elapsed since undertaking study or writing essays, just not knowing – but there was an emotional dimension 'I appreciate actual written feedback from any work submitted as it's the only contact that they have with us'. However a few students felt differently ('as long as I've passed it I'm not really concerned about what the feedback is').

- A few interviewees only suggested that distance learning units should be linked more overtly to achievement of standards so progress on the latter could be charted.

- Students said they liked 'stability, known structure, dates and expected returns of work'; 'lots of resources to work at a distance'; 'a link between units and tasks in schools'.

Tutors

- There was a widely felt need for the availability of an 'approachable' tutor to turn to in college. However this was most intensely felt at the beginning of the course (there was talk of being 'just thrown in' and 'overwhelmed') and gradually students became more independent. Most personal guidance tutors were praised very highly for regular checks that all was well and for rapid response to problems. However interviewees differed about what tutor support was appreciated. Purposes might include general reassurance that a student's coursework was 'on the right lines' or 'track', 'heading in the right direction', hitting the mark', 'jumping through the hoops at the right level' - which was mentioned by most; a contact in the event of a school placement problem was also mentioned by many interviewees. Tutors might provide guidance in response to minor queries ('It's amazing how much better you feel when you've had chance to ask that one question that's been really concerning you for such a long time'); being there in the event of a major problem; just being there ('I haven't been in much contact with her, but just the thought that she's there, she's pulled me through the course really'). Tutor sensitivity to student feelings was appreciated.

- The 'micro-political' implications of an exchange with college tutors appeared to be taken into account by students in deciding whether and how an approach would be made. Also, the belief that tutors, however friendly and helpful, were very busy, deterred some approaches. The view was expressed by a number of interviewees that the workload of some academic staff rendered them unable to provide sufficient support or created excessive stress for them; unpredictability was associated with fixed term contracts. Reluctance to approach tutors under such perceived circumstances may lead to snowballing of a problem. Distance learning, it was suggested, may recreate a 'one to one' tutor-student relationship which increased demands on tutor time. Change of tutor could undermine 'approachability'. Alternative sources of feedback and support could be and were provided by teachers on school placements and - where available - the peers, and many students saw these as more appropriate sources.

- The link tutor role was not always clear to students: some thought it was to 'make sure that the school were fulfilling their objectives' but others expected to be provided with support and feedback themselves. Having a link tutor who knew the school well, and who could be approached by a student with a problem, was appreciated.

Feedback on school placement

- Constructive, immediate, detailed feedback and support – especially verbal and informal - tailored to the individual in the form of suggestions and ideas from class teachers and mentors on school placements were considered of vital importance to the development of teaching capability ('you're getting direct feedback on your teaching and the quicker your feedback the quicker you can put things into action'). Lack of support on placement was thought to destroy confidence, or leave a student feeling that there was such a gap between expected and actual teaching experience that s/he should withdraw from the course. For most interviewees school experiences were very positive and more so than those reported by students qualifying from other courses. Most mentors and class teachers were deemed extraordinarily helpful, and for lesson planning especially.

- Interviews indicated that mature students may be better able to form appropriate relationships with teachers in school and secure beneficial outcomes for themselves on a day to day basis. Mature students may, it was suggested, display greater awareness of, and sensitivity to, differences between school practices and college expectations. But one interviewee suggested that students could be threatening ('I've been very surprised when I've been in schools how up to date all the information is over and above what most of the teachers know'). The mature student participation, regardless of the reason, appears to be a potentially positive factor in the success of a distance learning course.

- Not all schools were reported as offering sufficient feedback to students, and some reasons put forward for this were that mentors were too far away to attend training; lack of attention to the guidance sent by college to schools; being too busy; Ofsted inspection. Living a considerable distance outside the college area seemed to some interviewees to be linked with reports that on some work placements the school was allegedly unprepared for a student or appeared to have adopted a 'hands off' or 'supply teacher' mode. A few such schools were said to be accustomed to providing placements for other colleges and therefore mentoring students. These schools had, according to students, felt a lack of support from the course provider.

- Several interviewees regarded distance for placements as a problem for which there were no clear solutions. They recommended that people should not be enrolled from outside an area in which the college could operate a partnership policy effectively. The issues around distance, thinly spread rural schools, and small schools were more fully discussed in the mentor and tutor interviews.

- More feedback from college after school placements would be welcomed by many interviewees. Students work on placement, and the mentor record, was perceived as not being recognised explicitly by college. Yet students felt it should be regarded as of central importance ('it would have felt really good at the end of the placement to have a phone call from the tutor who had spoken to people at school and says 'I understand that you did really well on these things and how did you feel about this particular aspect'').

The peer group

- The peer group, if available, provided a source of feedback and support which, many interviewees said they used for a wide range of types of feedback and support, ranging from small factual queries ('at least we could get in touch with each other and say, you know, 'What does this mean, what does that mean?') to emotional reassurance ('We formed a close group and we support each other. I think support generally gives you confidence because you are a distance learner'). Most of those communicating with peers networked with colleagues on the course who lived relatively near each other. Formation of peer groups had also occurred through meeting at the prior interview. Following the initial finding of student isolation, the first base day together had been restructured to include bonding activities and students where grouped according to where they lived. Responses indicated that it was to the peer group that people tended to turn rather than personal guidance tutor. They met face to face, phoned and emailed each other to get ideas, check dates and deadlines, share resources, clarify queries and meanings, share experiences and problems and feelings. Students in a peer group had someone to ring to check that they were generally 'on the right lines' and asked for a second opinion if they were confused, or were experiencing problems finding materials. The appeal of peers seemed to lie in the common situation ('students give feedback for each other, because you all go through the same thing') with cost free admission of problems, and the approachability of peers. For all but one or two this support was highly valued. Not having

some-one 'out there' appeared to be a contributory factor for withdrawal from the course.

- Set against this, several interviewees said that they were too busy to make contact with peers and were reluctant to contact others who might not have time, either. Not being near to others was considered a barrier to peer support ('if you're not in an area where you have, people who are on the same course close to you that you can just meet up with and have a chat and thrash things out') and it was suggested the experiences of students living in a different area would differ. A minority were reluctant to contact peers for other reasons such as that other people were fine when she was not; and not wanting the burden of the problems of others. Many interviewees suggested allocating time during other base days for small group meetings with peers and tutors, on the grounds that it would be more beneficial than concentrated subject sessions ('I think that is the thing that I get out of the Base Days most, the actual talking to the people and going back to the environment where everybody knows what's going on and understands what you are going through'). Some suggested adding extra base days but others felt the time could not be freed up. The amount of exchange between peers varied – it appeared to be the relaxed, informal quality which mattered. These groups appeared to be effective in overcoming feelings of isolation. This peer exchange enabled them to move ahead more quickly and surely with coursework, avoided time wasted 'going off at a tangent'; cut unnecessary corners and - importantly - appeared to reduce worry and anxiety. From the student's point of view it increased the efficiency of their learning and saved time, energy and stress. In relation to teaching practice, peer exchange was reassuring – they could 'get things off their chests' and hear that others were 'in the same boat' and also had 'bad days'. They swapped experiences and bounced ideas around. But there could be concerns that other people were too busy to be contacted, and groups could fall apart. Only one interviewee suggested that peer exchange would have a negative effect on her. Although distance constrains the type of interaction that can take place between peers, the evidence suggested that active peer groups appear to play an important part for most students.

- To the extent that distance learners are relatively highly committed and see benefits in peer support, groups would be expected to be self sustaining. However weaknesses are likely to remain, for example in very thinly populated areas where peers may not meet together or where relationships have insufficiently gelled at the outset. However there may be identifiable reasons for why students feel they require the support and feedback of peers, it may be possible to take account of these and adapt course design and delivery accordingly. Further analysis of student interviews and the evidence from interviews with school mentors and tutors on the course provides an indication of potential for making such adjustments to overcome the challenges of distance learning.

Communications

- Views were mixed about the optimum mode of communication for feedback and support. Strong views were held by many that face to face contact is essential to establish relationships and for discussing issues and problems ('If I've got something quite important to discuss, I prefer to actually meet the person that I need to see. Somehow it is less misunderstanding if you are actually looking at the person that you are speaking to') and is effective ('it is reassuring and you have an immediate response'; 'you cover a wide variety of things and often things that it hadn't even occurred to think about come up'. But it is also costly ('face-to-face is getting hold of the person and it's their time').

- Phone conversations were said to be effective because of the instant interaction and real dimension. For complex issues phone calls may be seen as effective ('better if you've got questions really that are quite complicated and quite hard to write down in an e-mail'). But they were also seen as an imposition ('I am quite happy not to have phone calls, just simply because I can't then decide when I have got enough time to deal with issues that might have cropped up within a phone call. It's somebody else's agenda').

- Email is seen as appropriate by some for limited queries and factual communication ('It's good for checking things out and that kind of thing and leaving the odd message here and there'; 'it's good for passing on information like documents or interesting web sites and things like that to my friends and vice versa'). It is also seen to save time ('you can sort of send a note and don't have to do a formal letter or something so it can be quite quick'). Emails were liked by students because they could be dealt with at a convenient time by both sides and did not involve chasing round after busy people ('I am quite happy to receive by e-mail because at that point I can then decide whether I have got enough time to deal with that or not'). But emails were seen as less useful for discussion They were regarded as potentially insensitive and harmful because of the lack of visual or aural cues ('if something goes wrong, it can throw things out'). There were some who were slow at typing; poor connectivity in a remote area impeded use of emails. Email provides some social glue ('keeps me in touch with my friends'; 'We often get messages sent in the early hours of the morning for people who are up working'. A few interviewees admitted to deleting most emails unread because they allegedly contained information which would later be changed and because of the volume.

- The e-board was little used by the first two cohorts. A few said they found it cumbersome to navigate and gave up because of the time taken. Some others said they would not use it because of the impersonal 'broadcast to the world' character. But some considered that it was an efficient way of posting information about arrangements and deadlines etc for the course and was not used simply because it was not used. A purposeful launch of the e-board at the beginning of the course was recommended by a few people.

Student capability for technology mediated learning

- Despite IT self audit ('I crossed most of the boxes because I couldn't do any of it') a few students considered that their unfamiliarity with computers was not identified appropriately or the importance of this was not recognised ('It was a struggle throughout for me throughout'; 'they say that you can get through without having much experience at all, I think in reality the whole thing overwhelms you so much'). Prior courses might not help ('if you don't use it all the time it goes right out of your head'). It was also claimed that students needed more basic coverage on the course.

- Interviewees suggested that one to one, face to face support was needed for specific problems ('you need to be at the computer with a person that knows what they're doing next to you, to show you how to do things'; 'We do have a lot of written instruction and it is there for us really but it's not so easy when you're by yourself with you're computer and it doesn't do what you want it to do'). There could be other undetected computer user problems for example finding web pages ('if you miss a lecture or you want to look at things again, she says well you can follow the link through on the web site and it's all there, but where?'; 'It's OK if you're used to computers then you do know what people are talking about'). Related matters could absorb time ('I'm slow on the keyboard .. if I had assignments to write up I used to write them in rough and dictate to my wife'). There were other adverse experiences including computer crashes and being offline for months and even starting the course without a computer. This indicates that technology related

issues may be more common than is recognised. The extent of difficulties in both these areas was probed further in the questionnaire survey.

- On the other side, there were suggestions for more technology mediated learning: video-conferencing; improvements to the website; sharing good lesson plans and more documentation on line.

Feeling isolated

- The interviews confirmed the preliminary findings that feelings of isolation were widely experienced and that these were associated, especially for students from the initial cohort, with negative impacts. An emotional aversion to isolation would fit the warm feelings about the role of the peer group expressed by interviewees.

- For most of the interviewees the course had been chosen to enable them to qualify as teachers without compromising other aspects of their lives. Apart from their age and background – maturity and prior experience, often of professional work and sometimes of distance learning; and for many, young families – there is little to suppose they are different from students on other routes to becoming qualified to teach. With few exceptions they were not people who were particularly disposed towards taking responsibility, single handed, for their own learning and they had not on the whole chosen the course for this reason. Perhaps it is unsurprising, therefore that feedback and support were widely seen as having an important, and occasionally a critical, role.

- Given that the learning is at a distance, communications inevitably differ from those experienced on a traditional course, so that an explanation for isolation might also be lie here. One possibility was that student expectations of support through access to college tutors might be greater than actually experienced. However feelings of isolation were expressed by people who also considered that the arrangements for contact with the college were excellent; and tutors very approachable. Aversion to electronic communications was another possible explanation. Yet isolation still affected people who were very familiar with communicating by email. This suggested that the underlying explanation lies elsewhere.

- Interviewees from the second cohort pointed to the gap experienced by most mature students since last studying, and suggested that knowing that they were on the 'right lines' was very important, especially at the beginning of a course or a new part of it. Since so many new subjects had to be studied, for primary teaching, there was a similar need for each new, unfamiliar subject. Without feedback it appeared easy to veer far away from the 'right lines'. Such assurances in the form of written feedback on written work appeared to be highly valued by most students. A peer group, if established, appeared to be a trusted source of reassurance also.

Time and income for a part time, flexible course

- Most of the people interviewed said they had enrolled because of a wish or need to 'juggle' complex lives. This could be because of a need to earn an income (working for about 25 hours a week was not uncommon) or to be involved with bringing up young children. Distance from a full time PGCE provider was an important consideration for some, but tended to be combined with immobility for other reasons also. Whatever the reason, a key to choosing the course appeared to be that it is marketed as 'part time'. Retention rates for the course quickly improved as it was reshaped as a solution was found to balancing the 'solution' of becoming more flexible meet student needs; and

designing a structure to contain demands on staff. The total time demands and the commitment to blocks of rigid time on school placement were both cited as impeding the ability to continue a part time job. For those with no other financial support the course was not found to be viable, and this cohort was not yet deemed eligible, as were later cohorts, for the £6000 PGCE bursary. This was a complicating factor, distinguishing the first cohort. This payment may possibly enable those who have no other source of income to survive; but it appeared not be sufficiently substantial to support some, notably single parents.

- The gap between the expected and actual demands which students perceive are made by the course may also be an important influence on student satisfaction. Some interviewees felt in retrospect that they might have been better choosing the full time PGCE. They believed that this would have enabled them to gain the same qualification for less work and in less time. Other advantages of the full time route were mentioned, such as looking for work at the 'normal' time of year (some employers allegedly assume that qualifying at a different time results from a failed school placement). The length of the course was perceived by a few to be a disadvantage per se, although prolonging it further was also mentioned as a solution to spreading out the workload more thinly could also be seen as conflicting with lifestyle.

Other

For minor queries, some interviewees said they depended on contact with administrative staff. It was suggested that more and more flexible staffing would ease the way for improvements and enhance staff morale.

QUESTIONNAIRE SURVEY

Background data

The numbers of each cohort of responses (n=29 and n=18) are too small to permit robust findings. Nevertheless similarity of mean score over the five point Likert scale for each question is indicative that the responses may transcend course, or perhaps institutional differences. Although they indicate how these distance learners felt about their course, these feelings could reflect those of students in initial teacher education – or more narrowly in PGCE courses – view their programmes; we have no data with which to make such comparisons and therefore no grounds for associating the views of distance learners with the attributes of this kind of course.

The distance leaning students do tend, however to be mature – the average age of the cohorts was 34 and 39, and other records confirmed this is typical of students on this course. Consequently, and especially since they were all but one female, they tend to have dependent children, and or part time jobs, and the data from the survey shows how important course accessibility was for respondents.

Another distinctive feature was that 50% of cohort A and 44% of cohort B had already undertaken a distance learning course. This might be seen as evidence that they knew what they were letting themselves in for, and that they should be able to cope successfully. However it could also be the case – and this was investigated in the interviews – that initial teacher education for primary teaching is distinctive in several ways, and makes distinctive demands on all students, and distance learners in particular. One attribute is that students are preparing to teach a wide range of disparate subjects, most of which they are quite unfamiliar with. This might lead students to feel more 'at sea' with coursework demands. It could also result in greater workloads than learning in familiar subject territory. Unlike academic courses, a major part of student learning is on school placements, which are not part time, which may conflict with other commitments. School placements make quite distinctive demands on students and their need for feedback and support. Prior experience of distance learning does not necessarily imply that a student is well prepared for it in initial teacher education.

A mean score of above 2 (maximum 4) indicates that on average students agreed with the statement in the question. A mean score of below 2 (minimum 0) indicates that on average they disagreed with it.

The responses were low in number but provide a rough comparison between cohorts, and indicate the spread of responses across the five alternatives for each question, the percentages of the total are shown for each cohort. The spread gives an indication, as far as the small number of responses permit, of the convergence or divergence of student views, which is importance to the design of improvements to the course.

Summary of results:

Students' personal situation

Over two thirds from both cohorts agreed strongly, and a quarter of cohort A and almost a fifth of cohort B agree mildly, that distance learning provides enough flexibility to combine

lifestyle preferences with the course. About a half from both cohorts agreed strongly, and around a quarter mildly, that without the course it would not have been possible to qualify to teach (although almost a quarter of cohort B disagreed). Distance learning courses do appear to provide a new pool of potential new teachers.

Around two thirds of respondents from both courses agreed that it provides enough flexibility to combine with part work. Almost four out of five of both agreed that it provided enough flexibility to combine with bringing up a family. Four out of five of cohort A and two thirds of cohort B agreed that it overcomes the barrier of distance posed by other courses.

However around two thirds agreed that mature students find that returning to study after a break is challenging, and opinion is divided about whether mature students have the necessary support to meet the challenges when they return to study – in cohort B just over half disagreed.

About three quarters of each cohort agreed that it would not have been possible to do the course without the £6000 PGCE grant.

Feedback and support from peer group

Feelings of isolation and loneliness appear to be felt by around two thirds of respondents in each cohort, with between a tenth and a fifth disagreeing.

All the feedback and support questions were very strongly supported, scoring an average 3.5 to 3.8 in cohort A and 3.3 to 3.6 in B. About nine out of ten agreed, about two thirds of these strongly strongly, that being able to share experiences informally with peers is beneficial. About nine out of ten agreed that if you meet the right people at the beginning of the course you are more likely to stay in touch. All cohort A and over four out of five in cohort B agreed that it is reassuring to know that you and you peers are 'all in the same boat' when meeting challenges in the course. Over nine out of ten in cohort A and over eight out of ten of cohort B agreed that it helps you to progress if you can bounce off ideas and exchange tips with peers. Over nine out of ten in cohort A and B agreed that it is beneficial to be able to check that you are 'on the right lines' with peers. All but one of cohort A and nine out of ten of cohort B agreed that you feel better if you can share good and bad experiences on school placements with your peers.

There were two 'check' questions: 'contact with peers can make you feel worse and can undermine your confidence scored very low (1.0 and 1.1 in cohort A and B respectively); 'distance learners can manage on their own without a peer group' scored an average of 1.8 in cohort A and 1.9 in B with about two thirds disagreeing in each cohort.

Around seven out of ten from each cohort agreed that coursework queries can often be effectively resolved by talking to a peer group rather than to a tutor. Eight out of ten of cohort A and two thirds of B agreed that you can share things with peers that you would not want to share with course tutors or teachers in school although 1 of cohort A and 3 of B disagreed.

Views were mixed about whether distance learners have time to contact peers, however (mean score 2.1 and 2.2: in both cohorts over two in five agreed, and similar proportions disagreed).

These responses suggest that the peer group, as the interviews of both cohorts indicate, is perceived as having an important, and possibly a unique role throughout the course. This is supportive to the distinctive pedagogies developed for technology mediated learning.

Feedback and support from tutors from higher education

The perceived need for simplification of advice about who to approach about different aspects of the course and how this should be done at the start of the course was indicated by over half of cohort A and almost two out of five of cohort B who disagreed that this was clear. This is perhaps a reflection of the early stage of development of the course, and a few key staff on long term sick leave, for cohort A.

'Prompt, detailed written feedback tailored to coursework is always valuable but especially for distance learning' was almost unanimously endorsed by respondents in each cohort, in tune with the worries about being 'on the right lines' and the range of new subjects which had to be tackled. Almost three out of five agreed that 'distance learning students have sufficient reassurance from tutors about whether coursework is on the right lines, but in cohort A two fifths and in cohort B a third disagreed – mean scores were just 2.2 and 2.4. Almost nine out of ten agreed that 'prompt written feedback tailored to coursework is most valuable at the start of the course, which is in line with the previous question about distance learners finding returning to study difficult after a break and needing support for this.

Some tensions emerged from the interview data as to how far written feedback should be geared to individual needs and how far to standards. Nearly two out of three of cohort A and nearly three quarters of cohort B agreed that written feedback from tutors is closely enough geared to individual understanding and capabilities. Half respondents from cohort A and almost four out of five of cohort B agreed that 'written feedback from tutors is closely enough geared to 'standards' and benchmarks for 'good teaching' (a third of cohort A neither agreed nor disagreed). Responses to 'without detailed feedback on coursework it would be difficult to meet assessment criteria' differed between cohorts which scored 2.8 and3.7 respectively – this was almost unanimously agreed by cohort B while three out of five of cohort A agreed and about three out of ten of neither agreed nor disagreed.

Given the view expressed in some interviews with students and mentors that workloads were very heavy by comparison with other courses leading to qualified teacher status, two probing questions were put in the questionnaire. In cohort A responses, more than two fifths disagreed that 'more coursework is required than is needed to meet the standards to teach'; the mean score was only 1.6 and less than one in five agreed. In cohort B however, the mean score was 2.6 and two in five respondents agreed, a third of the total strongly, indicating possible disparity between the cohorts. But both cohorts disagreed (mean scores 1.2 and 1.6 respectively) with 'It is a waste of time doing coursework which does not contribute towards grades'; over two thirds of cohort A and over two in five of cohort B disagreeing. It is clear, that were these responses to be typical of a larger sample, that the distance learners see the workload of preparation as necessary for their preparation to teach. The explanation of complaints about workloads appears to lie elsewhere, and one reason may lie in reconciling jobs and families with the course.

Both cohorts on average agree it would be beneficial to have more communication with tutors. For cohort A, more face to face was the more preferred option compared with phone, and personal email discussions (mean scores are 2.9; 2.2 and 2.1). For cohort B the means are reversed with personal email discussion 2.9; phone discussions 2.6 and face to face 2.5. There was a disparity of views, however, in each case: about a fifth of cohort B disagreed with more face to face; about three in ten of cohort A disagreed about telephone and email.

There were also disparate views about whether 'college tutors have been the main source of support and feedback on the course. Over half of both cohorts agreed but two fifths (cohort A) and a third (cohort B) disagreed. On average the score indicated agreement (2.3 and 2.2 respectively) and this is perhaps surprising given the interview emphasis on support from teachers in school.

However, there does appear to be an approachability issue. On average, there was agreement that students do not get to know tutors well enough to approach them about a minor issue (2.4 and 2.6 respectively) – although about a quarter in each cohort disagreed. But there was disagreement on average with 'students do not get to know tutors well enough to approach them about a personal crisis which may damage course progress' (mean scores 1.9 for each cohort). Here again there were disparate views with about one fifth strongly agreeing and strongly disagreeing in each cohort. The explanation for this seemingly discordant evidence may lie in the question: students may know their personal guidance tutor, who they may rely on for feedback and in crises, very well. But they may be less familiar with subject tutors. Similar ambiguity may inform the interpretation of the final question in this section in which respondents were asked how far they agreed or disagreed with 'On a distance learning course it is expected that personal contact with tutors is minimal'. About two out of five of cohort A and three out of ten of cohort B disagreed. But two fifths of cohort A and over half of cohort B agreed. The responses to the later questions suggest that managing student expectations could be quite important to the success of a distance learning course for initial teacher education.

Mentors and teachers on school placement

There is little reason to expect a different sort of experience for distance learners on school placement compared with student teachers from other courses, since this is not the distance learning part of the course – except for factors associate with student characteristics, such as being mature, having varied work experience, having already brought up children. On the other hand, it is useful to know if distance learners, despite their different characteristics, do have similar experiences to others, and have similar needs for feedback and support. Some of the questions were set accordingly, as a result of previous research findings and notably relating to a project investigating the perspectives of qualifiers from the four year undergraduate route. Schools and children, experientially, appear quite different from preparation elsewhere to teach, and it is for many a 'shock'. On average respondents agreed that 'It is difficult to be prepared for the real experience of teaching on school placement' (mean scores 2.5 and 2.4) and three fifths of cohort A and half of cohort B agreed. Agreement that 'Support is particularly important at the beginning of a school placement' was almost unanimously agreed, no one disagreeing. In common with students form other courses there was strong agreement (in the cohorts almost unanimous) that 'A bad experience with a difficult class can dent your confidence to teach if there is little support and encouragement from the class teacher' (mean scores 3.7 and 3.6). The quality and consistency of feedback and support appears very important to these students.

Around four out of five in both cohorts agreed that 'class teachers are the main source of individual support and feedback on the course', with well over half agreeing strongly from each cohort (mean scores 3.1 and 3.3). There was unanimous endorsement for 'day to day informal feedback and constructive support for teaching is very important for developing teaching capability' (3.9 and 3.7 respectively). This underpins the importance of the partnership in ensuring the consistent quality of school placements.

Respondents agreed, on average that 'most mentors give adequate feedback and support to student teachers' (2.8 and 2.9 respectively) but more agreed mildly than strongly (a quarter and a third 'strongly' in cohorts A and B; a half and two fifths 'weakly'). Agreement that 'most class teachers (where different) give adequate feedback and support to student teachers' was slightly more strongly endorsed (3.0 for cohort A; 3.1 for B) – but again most was weak agreement (by over half and three fifths in cohort A and B respectively). There was stronger agreement that 'most mentors (or if the same class teachers) discuss the formal assessment on school placement with the student' (mean score 3.0 and 3.3 with a third and a half respectively agreeing strongly).

Consistency across different placements appears to be believed to be a persisting problem. 'Informal support and feedback to students is consistent across different schools' scored very low – 0.9 in cohort A and 1.6 in cohort B; moreover half of cohort A disagreed strongly. The potential concern about placements in small and or geographically isolated schools, typical of cohort A, provides one possible explanation. It is unclear however whether responses relate to own experience or the reputed experience of others.

Average scores were mixed for 'Most schools are well prepared to support students to meet the requirements of the course provider' (cohort A 1.8 and B 2.2). There was a concentration of neutral or near neutral responses. This might reflect a lack of knowledge of responders.

Cohort A disagreed on average with 'schools have to provide extra support for some students because of the distance from the course provider' (mean score 1.6) but almost half were neutral. Cohort B although the average indicated agreement (2.3) were also largely neutral. Students may appear unaware of the challenges.

In response to 'formal assessment is consistent across block placements', cohort A mean score was 1.3 - disagreement; cohort B 2 - neutral. From cohort A, two fifths disagreed strongly and three out of ten mildly; from cohort B two fifths disagreed. Further investigation is required.

The interview data indicate that cohort A students would like more opportunity for discussion with tutors in higher education at the end of school placements. This is endorsed by the mean score of 1.5 for 'tutors offer opportunity to discuss the formal assessment by the school afterwards'(cohort B 2.3).

Three questions related to distance learners:

There was agreement on average that 'previous work experience helped students to gain confidence to teach with less support' from around seven (cohort A) to nine out of ten (cohort B), - means 3.0 and 3.3.

There was agreement that 'previous work experience helps students to gain confidence to teach with less support' (mean score 3.0 and 3.3 respectively). There was also agreement that 'The experience of bringing up children helps students to gain confidence to teach with less support' (3.3 and 2.9 respectively).

There was agreement that 'distance learners quickly establish good relationships as colleagues with teachers in school and this enhances support' by over two thirds of each cohort (mean score 3.0 and 2.9 respectively. This complements the views of mentors that as mature students the distance learners 'fit in' well with staff and have a professional attitude to relationships.

Computers and electronic communications for feedback and support

From the interview data, there were reports of computer problems which seriously inhibit progress or are quite time consuming, from some students, and these were not ameliorated by prior skills audit or technical support at a distance. Three questions sought to explore evidence for this more systematically, but the sample size is insufficient for robust conclusions. It is noteworthy, however, that over half of cohort A and half of cohort B agreed that 'some distance learning students have problems with computers or electronic communications and this slows course progress, although others (just under a fifth of cohort A and three tenths of B) disagreed (mean score 2.4 and 2.2). Respondents in cohort A disagreed and in cohort B were neutral on average, to 'student have prior computer qualifications but lack of practice leads to problems on the course' (1.9 and 2.0 respectively), with just under one fifths, and two fifths agreeing in each cohort. If these responses relate to personal experience, there would be an unaddressed problem in both courses. There was agreement, on average in each cohort with 'Most computer problems are specific and on the spot discussion is needed to overcome them' (mean score 2.3 and 2.7 respectively).

There appears to be potential dissonance between the cohort responses to 'electronic communications are not as effective for feedback and support as phone or face to face' and the individual questions (q30-32) about whether more time is wanted using each medium for discussion with tutors. Cohort A respondents agreed on average (2.4 mean score) but cohort B disagreed (1.3 mean score). The diversity of view in each cohort appears to endorse the very wide range of views emerging from the interview data.

Respondents agreed 'electronic communications are helpful because everyone can respond when it is convenient' (3.3 mean score for each cohort) and slightly less strongly that 'electronic communications enable access to most resources and make the course much easier to follow' (2.8 and 2.7 mean scores). There was disagreement for about a fifth of each cohort for the latter, perhaps indicating access problems for a minority. Neutral responses to both questions were minimal.

EVIDENCE FROM MENTOR INTERVIEWS

Mentors concerns about student isolation

The interviews with mentors in school where distance learning students had been placed provided very similar views to those of students in relation to both the isolation of distance learning students and the role of peer groups. It is not possible to gauge, from their views, the extent of improvement in peer networks, since the first cohort, as the distance learner placements were spread thinly and over time. Although each school had relatively little experience of distance learning students there was a widespread sense that distance learners felt more isolated than students from other courses and mentors reported that students had expressed this to them. The mentors considered that isolation had made things more difficult for the students. As one said: 'They feel cut off, they don't have others around. Sometimes it can be very lonely. They could email staff in college and get a quick response. But they wanted to talk to students'. Mentors considered that it was especially important to have peer support on block placement, and the comments mirrored those of the students: 'They need an opportunity to meet – to talk about what is happening in school'. Comments included: 'If the day hasn't gone well, they have no one to go back and moan to'; 'They need to get it off their chests'; 'If others have had a bad day as well, they feel better, they have a shoulder to cry on'; 'They want somebody in the same boat'; 'They need to talk, bounce ideas, comfort each other'; 'they miss out: They need to know there is someone out there'.

Support from teachers

Some teachers appeared to have been very supportive: 'They (the distance learning students) need to chat to staff more than other students'. One said that 'puzzling together over material helped us to develop a relationship. We got to grips with it together'. Others felt that distance learning students avoid mentioning problems to mentors. Relatively short placements – which provide a variety of experiences and fit better with lifestyle pressures – militate against building relationships with school staff. One mentor suggested that 'When there are problems they may take the attitude 'I can cope whatever happens'' and they 'do not use contacts with whom they can talk and open up'. This mixed response suggests that it cannot be expected that distance learners will, in school staff, find an effective substitute for the peer group. Even though some peer group relationships were established with email and telephone communications these are likely to provide less support than face to face meetings in a traditional course.

Damage inflicted by isolation

Mentors felt that the lack of a peer group could be damaging. The lack of contact was thought to make the placement 'more difficult'; this in turn could exacerbate the feeling of isolation. There were thought to be other knock-on effects. Several mentors suggested that stress levels were raised, and one said: 'They can be nervous because they are not communicating with peers'. There was a problem, it was suggested if 'they are not confident, introvert, quiet – they won't come forward to ask questions'. Clearly distance learners face a more hostile environment and more challenges than students on a conventional course.

Distance learning appeared to cause additional demands for school staff. Gaps inevitably emerged in the understanding of coursework which would have been unlikely to have

occurred on a traditional route because peer group face to face interaction or exchange with tutors are more readily available. Incidents were cited where school staff, sometimes specialists, had been called upon to help resolve student difficulties in handling or interpreting course material. One mentor suggested that a student would have understood a 'sheet of A4' explanation better than detailed guidance; another that a student 'lacked sufficient computer literacy' to use a CD for data to carry out required tasks. Several schools, notably those geographically distant from the college, were concerned about the additional demands associated with distance learning students. Schools felt that if a distance learning student was not coping, extra support strategies would be required from them because of the isolation of the student; moreover the personal rapport for this was felt to be especially challenging. Although problems had not actually occurred, some schools were anxious; it was felt that particular care should be taken in allocating an experienced mentor.

High calibre students

Nevertheless the distance learners were considered to be very good students by most interviewees and the majority of schools would 'have one again' if of the same 'high calibre'. Favourable comments were made about their commitment and professional attitude; their background experience; the effective use they made of their course; their preparedness and organisation; their potential for behaviour management; their commitment; the extent to which they refreshed the school with their ideas and activities. They were also regarded as relatively 'demanding' for school staff, in the best sense of the word. Mentors reported contact before the placement to ask questions and float ideas; a keenness to say if they did not understand; they were said to be 'bright and capable' and ready to ask for help with queries and problems. Students could also be regarded as assertive, for example in demands for the time of subject co-ordinators to complete assignments. Extra costs would be incurred for providing support for schools to meet the additional demands made by distance learners.

Placing students in pairs in the same schools provides peer group support and where this has been possible it is regarded as very successful – a cheap and effective way of overcoming the many challenges. One mentor commented that paired students chose to spend their 'free' non-contact time together exchanging experiences and ideas. In practice pairing is not a feasible option in an area where primary schools are very small and students are geographically far apart.

Isolated schools

A further view expressed by a few mentors - especially those from schools which were geographically distant from the college - was that the distance learning course was very different from other routes to QTS and that schools 'don't understand the course'. One mentor suggested that 'teachers are not up to scratch on handling students from the course – they are 'learning on the hoof''. The flexible modular design of the course increased the complexity of 'working out where (students) are (on the course), what they are doing, which term they are in' which one mentor called a 'minefield'. Such schools were likely to feel 'we are not partners'. Distance, it appeared, was a problem for schools as well as students.

Distance from college has effects which parallel those of the distance learning students they host. Since the schools where distance learners are placed are likely to be near the homes of the students rather than college, this poses an additional challenge for distance learning courses for teacher education. This poses a structural challenge. TTA attempts to streamline approaches and documentation across different higher education providers will help reduce

frictional differences, but will not address the challenge posed by the distinctiveness of a distance learning course and the isolation of some schools from providers.

Possible solutions for school isolation

One possible solution which is being tried is school clusters, in which mentor peer groups can discuss issues and resolution of problems. Some mentors welcome clusters and value them highly. Others say they have insufficient time to be involved or may not be able to find release costs. School clusters may also drift away from partnership policy. Another possible solution is the provision of local 'link tutors' who are familiar with and strengthen local school links. Although our evidence suggests that this is popular with schools and students, there was a suggestion that this arrangement may complicate the direct link with college and potentially weakens the delivery of partnership policy. Other ways of providing local face to face partnership support may be developed but it appears there is an underlying tension between central control and devolved delivery. Innovative approaches imply extra resources and costs on a rolling basis.

Evidence from mentors: practical problems

Some surprises emerged from the mentor interviews. It was suggested by a number of mentors that the concentration on reading in the course appeared to impair consideration of and reflection on practical delivery. It was suggested that one of the outcomes of peer group discussion is that practical challenges are aired; ideas for resolving them bounced around and solutions thrashed out. Thus the student who has been involved in such live exchanges may be better prepared to apply what has been learned from coursework. The lack of such opportunities implies an additional challenge when the student is confronted with real children and classes. Distance learning may leave the student with more discretion to avoid reflection on practical applications; some will prefer to stick with the books.

MENTOR INTERVIEWS SUMMARY:

Mentor concern about student isolation

- Each school had relatively little experience of distance learning students
- There was a widespread sense that distance learners felt more isolated than students from other courses
- The mentors considered that isolation had made things more difficult for the students.

Mentor comments

- 'They feel cut off, they don't have others around. Sometimes it can be very lonely. They could email staff in college and get a quick response. But they wanted to talk to students'
- 'They need an opportunity to meet – to talk about what is happening in school'
- 'If the day hasn't gone well, they have no one to go back and moan to'
- 'They need to get it off their chests'
- 'If others have had a bad day as well, they feel better, they have a shoulder to cry on'
- 'They want somebody in the same boat'
- 'They need to talk, bounce ideas, comfort each other'
- 'They miss out: They need to know there is someone out there'

Mentor interviews: issues around lack of access to peers

- Increased anxiety over preparation
- Increased stress and nervousness
- School staff pulled in to sort out frictions with course demands such as instructions, explanation, extracting material from a CD
- School staff faced with more questions and demands such as for resources
- Less consideration of and reflection on practical delivery of course

Isolated mentors

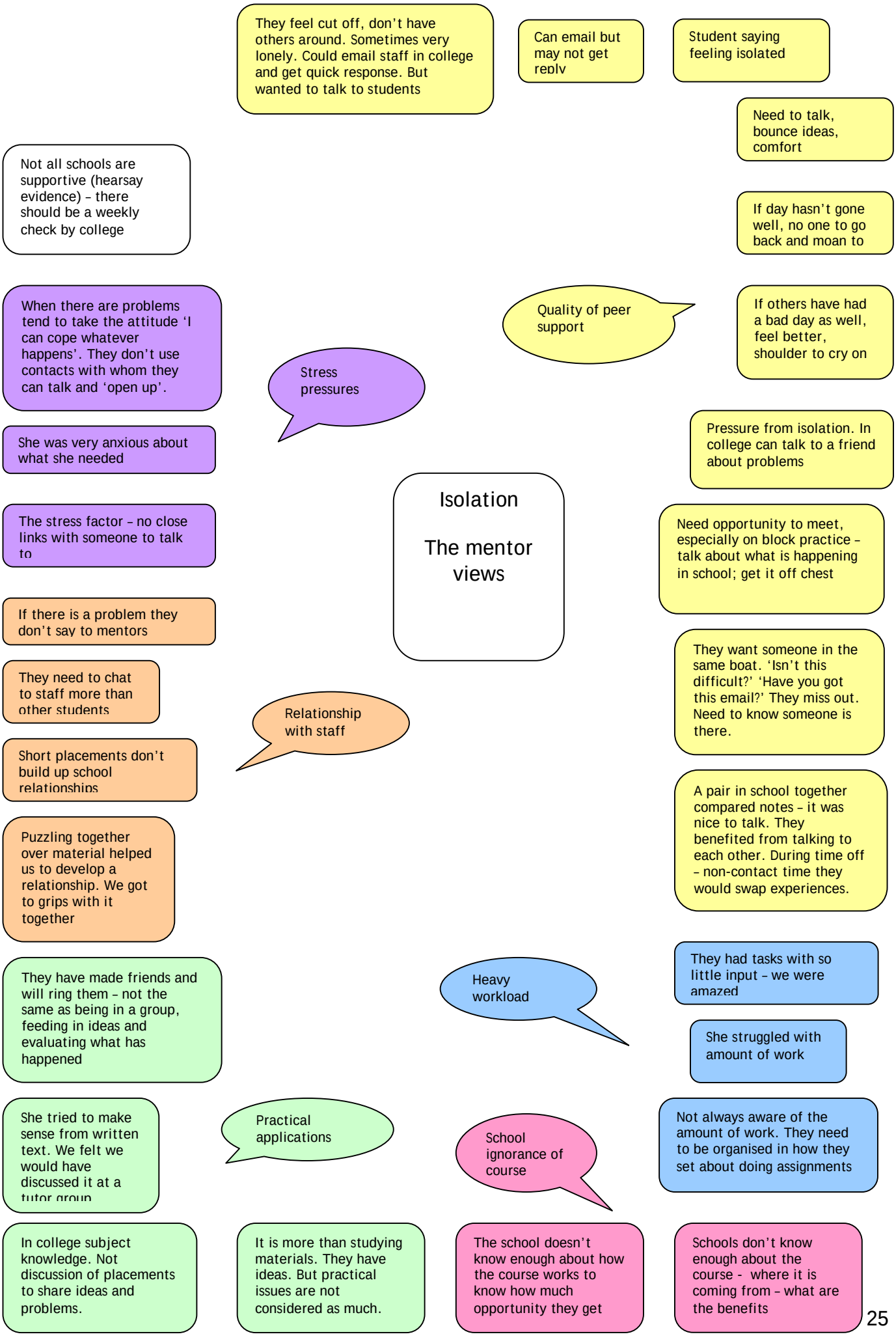
- Schools geographically distant from partnership events and training could encounter problems
- View that the distance learning course was very different from other routes to QTS
- Schools 'don't understand the course'
- One mentor suggested that 'teachers are not up to scratch on handling students from the course – they are 'learning on the hoof''
- The flexible modular design of the course increased the complexity of 'working out where (students) are (on the course), what they are doing, which term they are in' which one mentor called a 'minefield'
- Such schools were likely to feel 'we are not partners'

Peer links for schools

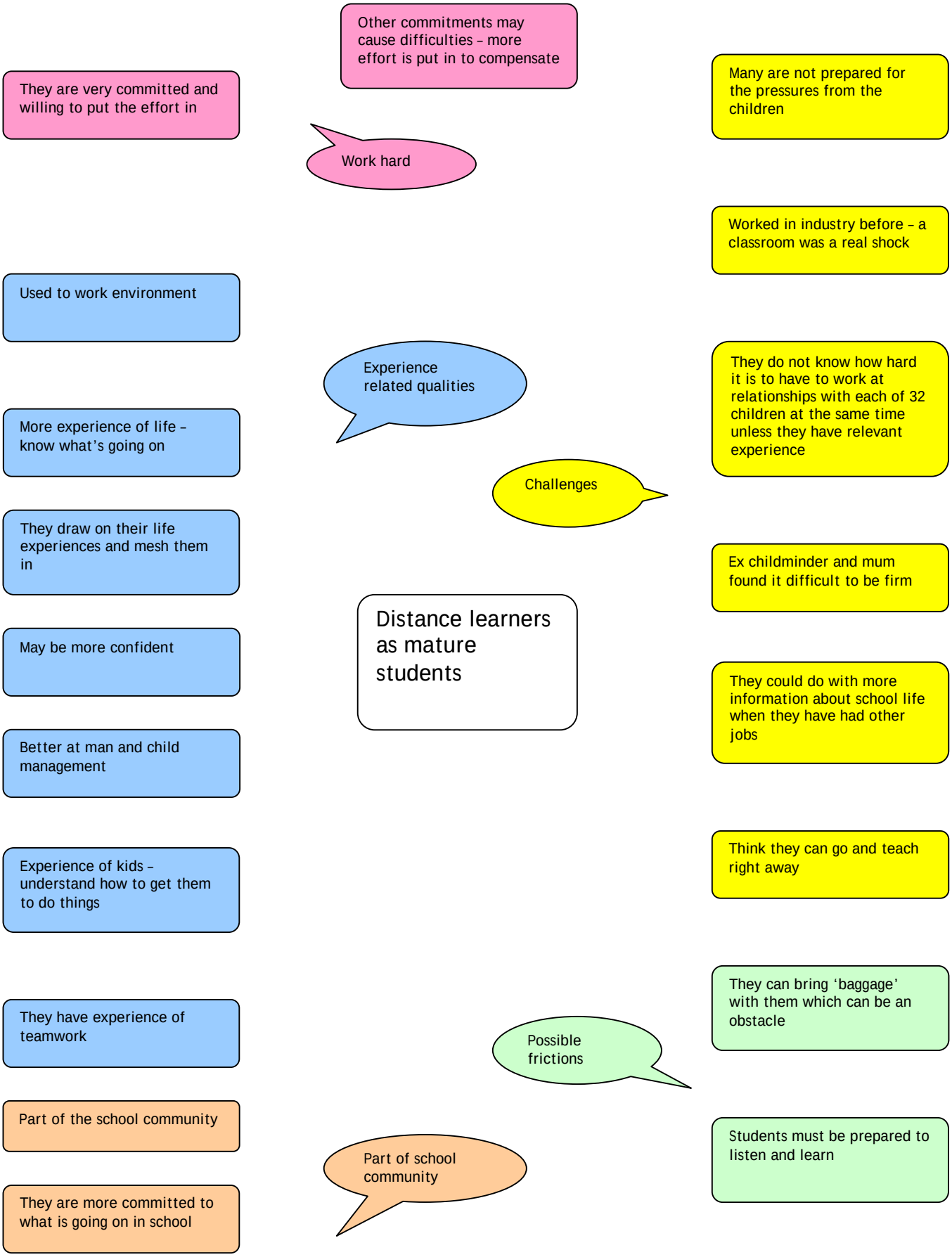
- Face to face local support
- School clusters
  - Very supportive for mentors
  - Some mentors say they have no time

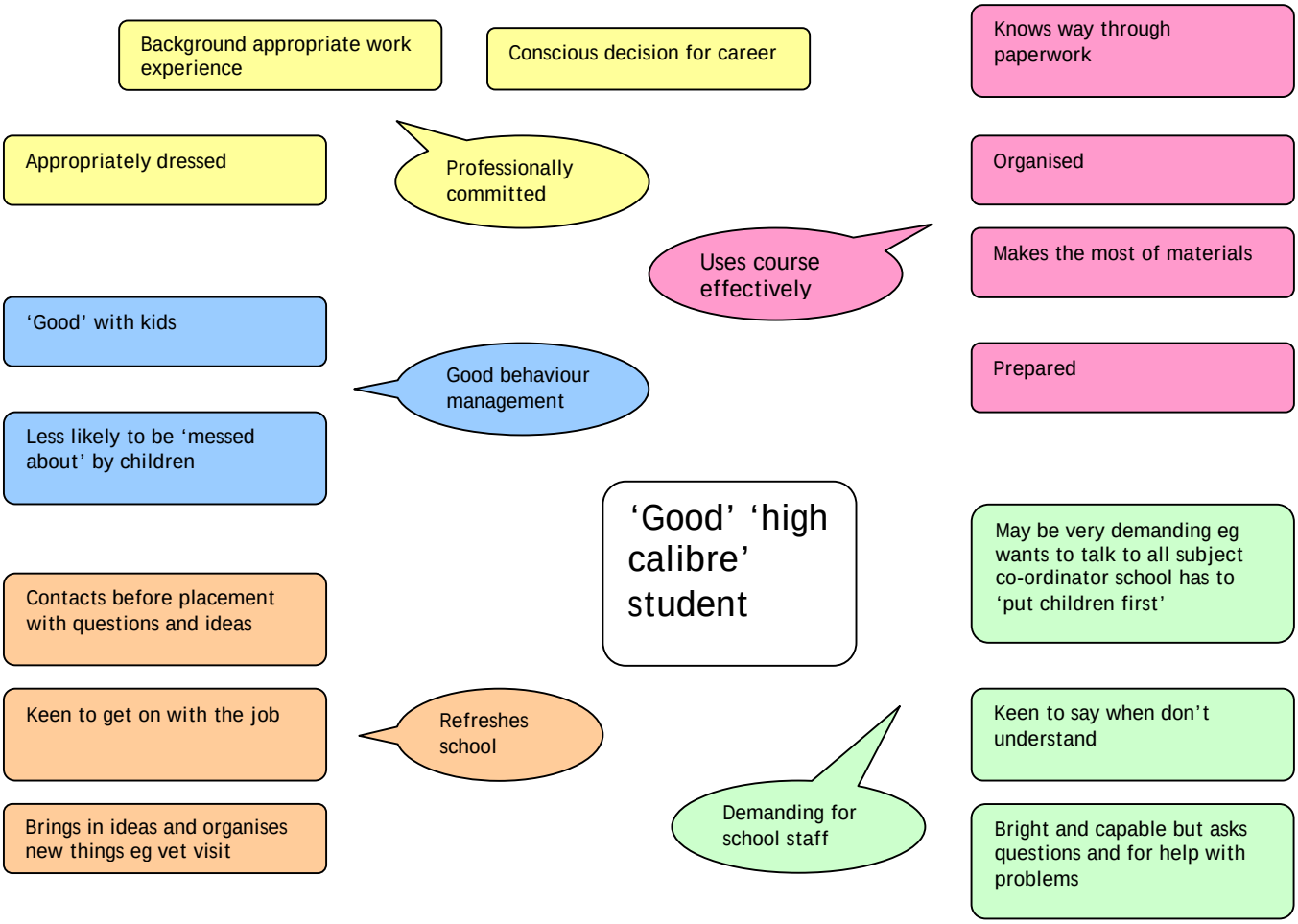
- Some mentors cannot get release costs
- Local link tutors who know the school
  - Supportive with mentors and tutors

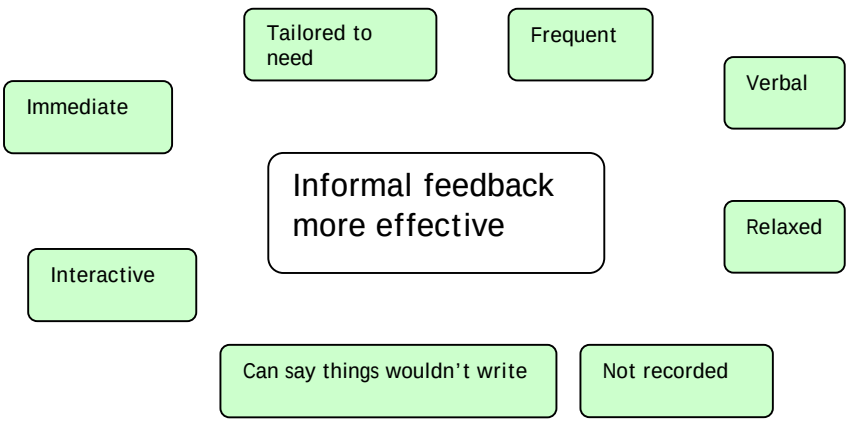
But there is an underlying tension between central control and devolved delivery


Isolation
The mentor views
They feel cut off, don't have others around. Sometimes very lonely. Could email staff in college and get quick response. But wanted to talk to students
Can email but may not get reply
Student saying feeling isolated
Need to talk, bounce ideas, comfort
Not all schools are supportive (hearsay evidence) – there should be a weekly check by college
If day hasn't gone well, no one to go back and moan to
When there are problems tend to take the attitude 'I can cope whatever happens'. They don't use contacts with whom they can talk and 'open up'.
Quality of peer support
If others have had a bad day as well, feel better, shoulder to cry on
Stress pressures
She was very anxious about what she needed
Pressure from isolation. In college can talk to a friend about problems
The stress factor – no close links with someone to talk to
Need opportunity to meet, especially on block practice – talk about what is happening in school; get it off chest
If there is a problem they don't say to mentors
They need to chat to staff more than other students
They want someone in the same boat. 'Isn't this difficult?' 'Have you got this email?' They miss out. Need to know someone is there.
Relationship with staff
Short placements don't build up school relationships
A pair in school together compared notes – it was nice to talk. They benefited from talking to each other. During time off – non-contact time they would swap experiences.
Puzzling together over material helped us to develop a relationship. We got to grips with it together
They had tasks with so little input – we were amazed
Heavy workload
They have made friends and will ring them – not the same as being in a group, feeding in ideas and evaluating what has happened
She struggled with amount of work
Practical applications
Not always aware of the amount of work. They need to be organised in how they set about doing assignments
She tried to make sense from written text. We felt we would have discussed it at a tutor group
School ignorance of course
In college subject knowledge. Not discussion of placements to share ideas and problems.
It is more than studying materials. They have ideas. But practical issues are not considered as much.
The school doesn't know enough about how the course works to know how much opportunity they get
Schools don't know enough about the course - where it is coming from – what are the benefits


Distance learning course mentor views
Characteristics
Mental attitude, self-reliance, self organisation
More committed – have made sacrifices
Lack of day to day contact. Finding it difficult, although aware beforehand. She felt on her own.
So much more to do with no one there
Not the same as with the peer group – can meet in the bar, lecture theatre
Isolation
They can be nervous because they are not communicating with peers
If finding it difficult can become very isolated
College links
Are students confident in getting emails and college links?
Problem – when student is far from college rather than school far from college
Unfamiliarity with the course
We don't understand the course
We want to visit SMC to see
Doing the crits – no-one knew what to do
We are not partners
Family influences
Family drives choice of location
They have their own children and understand when children are upset
Heavy workload from family
Teachers are not up to scratch on handling students from the course 'learning on the hoof'
Working out where they are is a minefield – what they are doing, which term they are in, how many are doing it
Schools do not know about distance learning unless they have taken on a student – the college should advertise so schools know more about it
If not coping need more support strategies - crucial
Very difficult to get personal involvement to put strategies in place
Demands on school staff
Is the mentor inexperienced?
Heads need to be careful in taking on a distance learner
A heavy burden to take on – less support
Distance learning placements put stress on school staff
Very heavy workload - hard
Student taken aback by the amount of work to be done in the time
Demands on staff associated with the course
Difficulty in breaking mid term plans into weeks.
They need a side of A4 rather than a chunky document
Need more support than others at the beginning
A problem if they are not confident, are introvert, quiet – they won't come forward to ask questions
Students can be dogmatic – 'we need this, need that' and we have to find it.
Stress, anxiety about materials
Student unsure how to use CD to carry out tasks. Not sufficiently computer literate. Had to be helped by expert in school. The package didn't enable the best use of the disk.


Distance learners as mature students
Work hard
They are very committed and willing to put the effort in
Other commitments may cause difficulties – more effort is put in to compensate
Many are not prepared for the pressures from the children
Worked in industry before – a classroom was a real shock
Experience related qualities
Used to work environment
More experience of life – know what's going on
They draw on their life experiences and mesh them in
May be more confident
Better at man and child management
Experience of kids – understand how to get them to do things
Challenges
They do not know how hard it is to have to work at relationships with each of 32 children at the same time unless they have relevant experience
Ex childminder and mum found it difficult to be firm
They could do with more information about school life when they have had other jobs
Think they can go and teach right away
Possible frictions
They can bring 'baggage' with them which can be an obstacle
Students must be prepared to listen and learn
Part of school community
They have experience of teamwork
Part of the school community
They are more committed to what is going on in school
Good judgement. They get the balance between 'visitor' and 'student'
They talk to staff on an equal footing, speaking professionally


Background appropriate work experience
Conscious decision for career
Knows way through paperwork
Appropriately dressed
Professionally committed
Organised
Uses course effectively
Makes the most of materials
'Good' with kids
Good behaviour management
Prepared
Less likely to be 'messed about' by children
'Good' 'high calibre' student
May be very demanding eg wants to talk to all subject co-ordinator school has to 'put children first'
Contacts before placement with questions and ideas
Keen to get on with the job
Refreshes school
Keen to say when don't understand
Demanding for school staff
Brings in ideas and organises new things eg vet visit
Bright and capable but asks questions and for help with problems


Tailored to need
Frequent
Verbal
Immediate
Informal feedback more effective
Relaxed
Interactive
Can say things wouldn't write
Not recorded

INTERVIEWS WITH TEACHER EDUCATORS

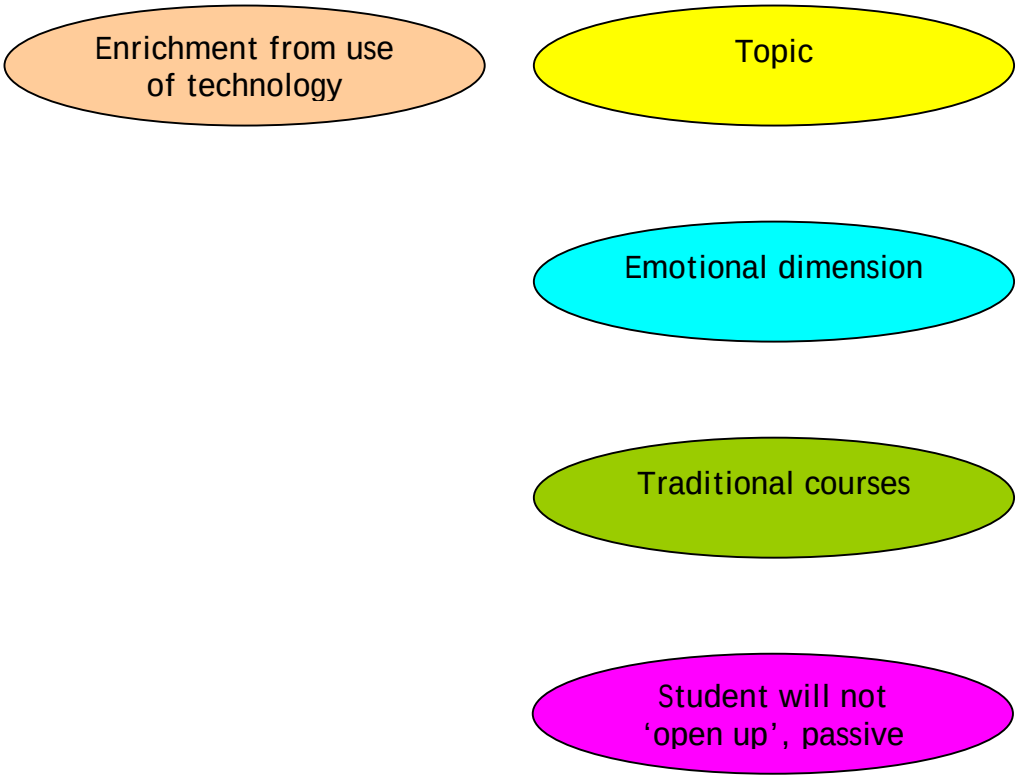
Characteristics

- Some teacher educators with a wealth of experience
- IT literate, some for decades, with range of skills
- A variety of subject specialists including science, maths, design technology and music
- Disparate roles: subject tutor; written coursework designer; personal guidance tutor; 'link' tutor with schools; assessor for written assignments; assessor for practical areas; partnership manager; administrator; e-communications manager; trouble shooter.

Consensus of views of educators of teachers …..

- Distance learning is hard work for teacher educators
- Materials and written assessment must be precise, comprehensive, formative but emotionally transparent
- Distance learning is hard work for students
- Reasons for taking role: 'gullible' 'available'
- Initial teacher education is distinctive, posing additional challenges for distance learning
- Students are highly motivated, dedicated and enthusiastic – will make excellent teachers
- Students could not, for lifestyle reasons, have qualified in any other way

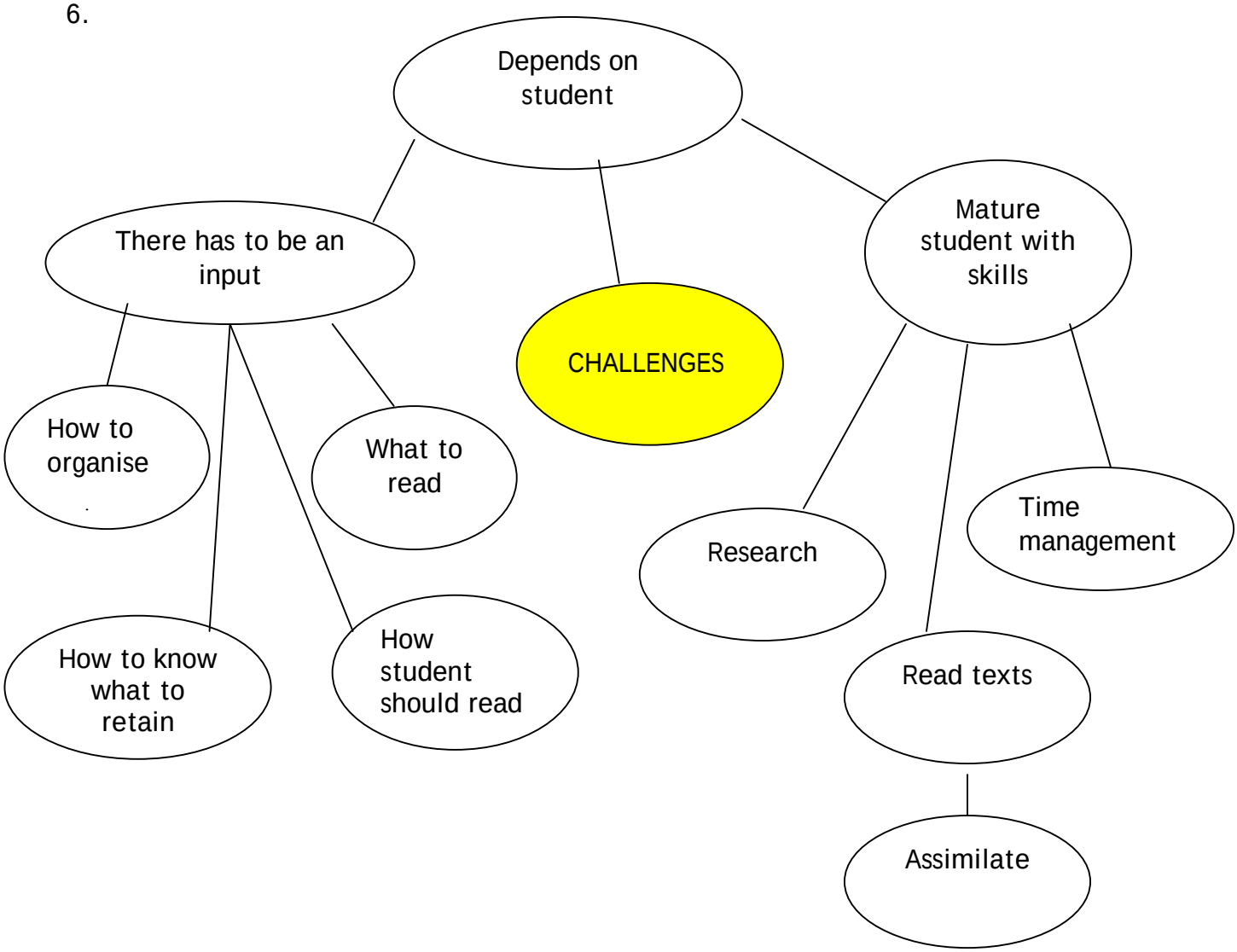
Colour coding



Challenges - student input required

CHALLENGES

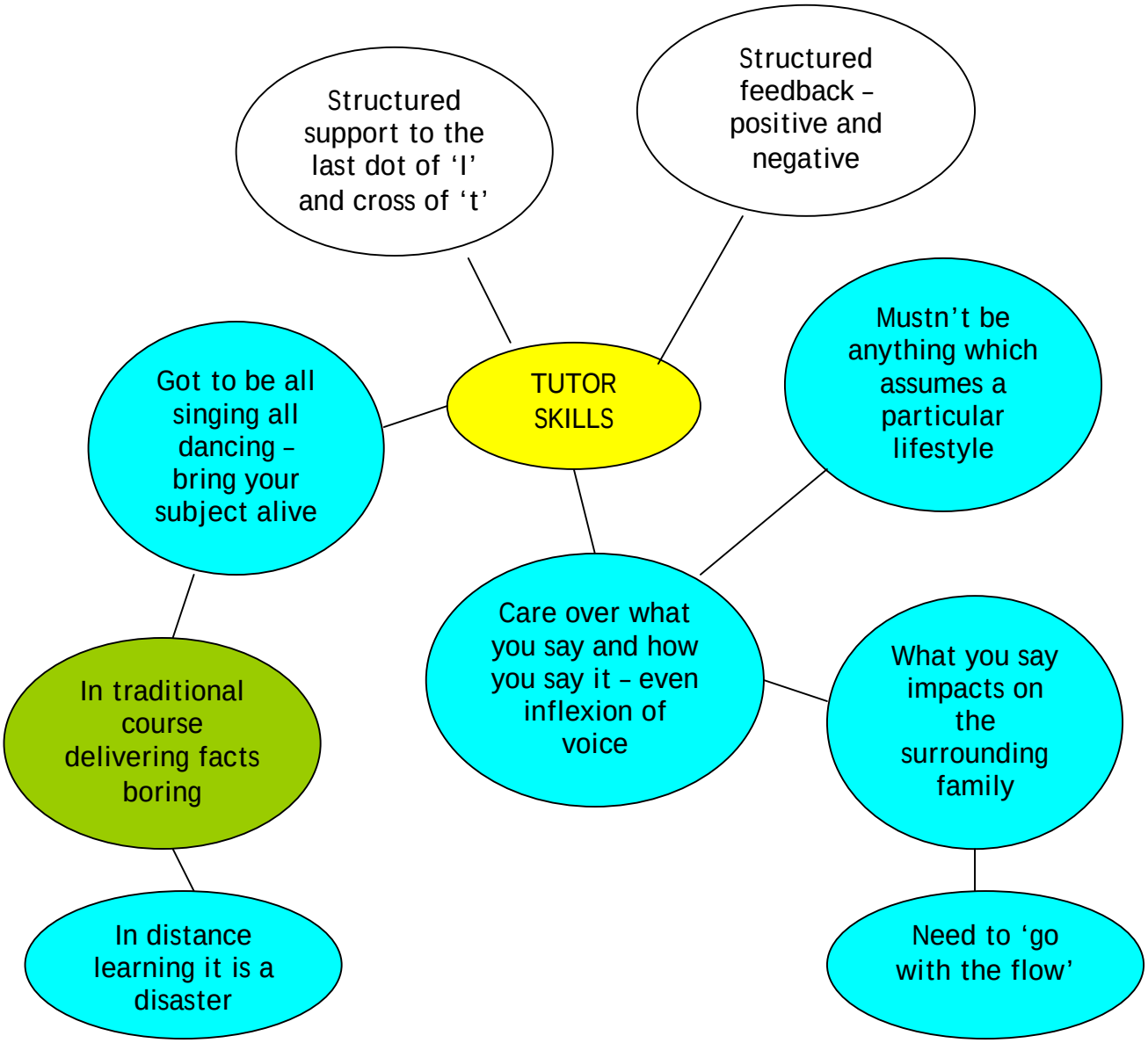
6.



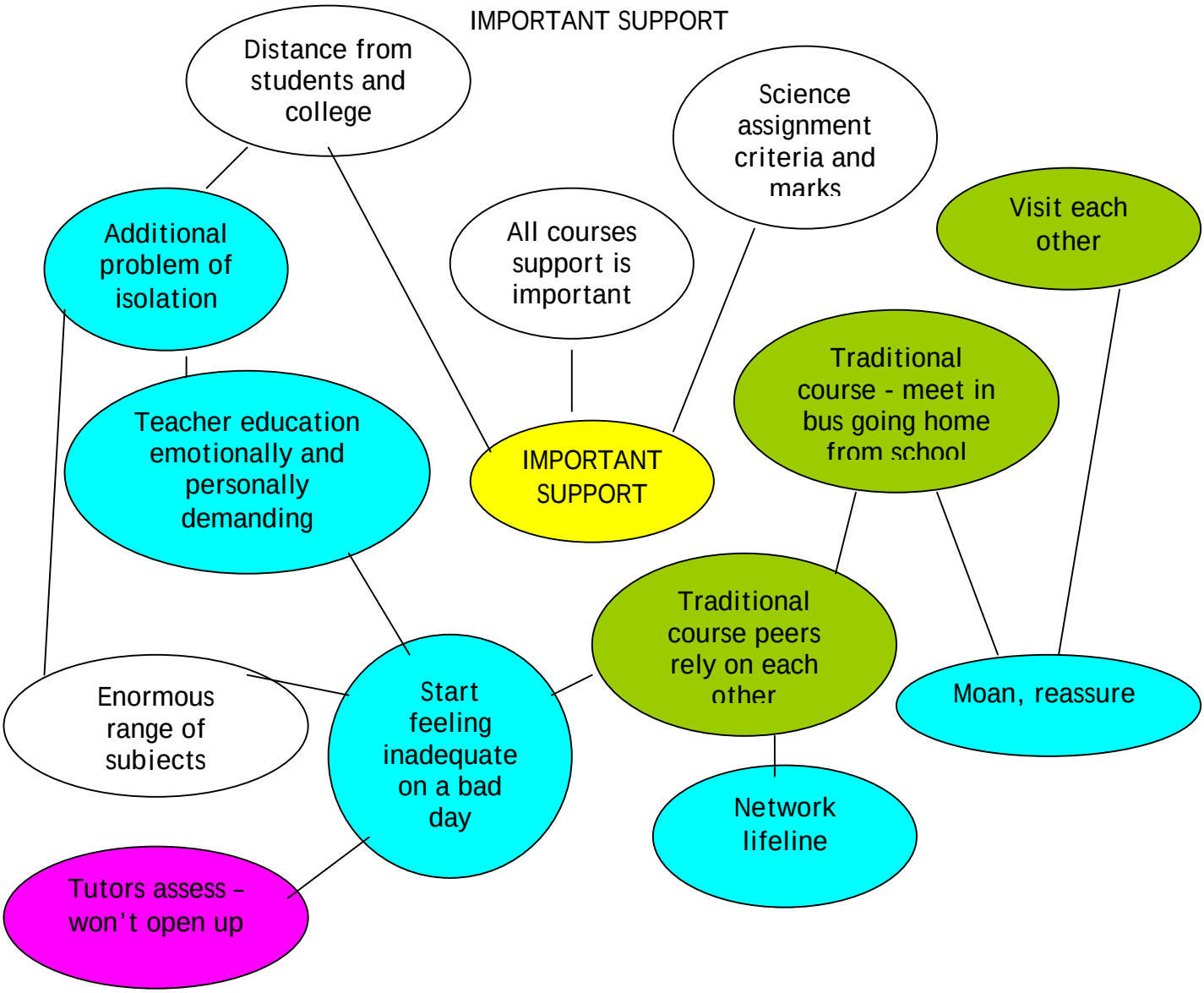
Support for written work

6.

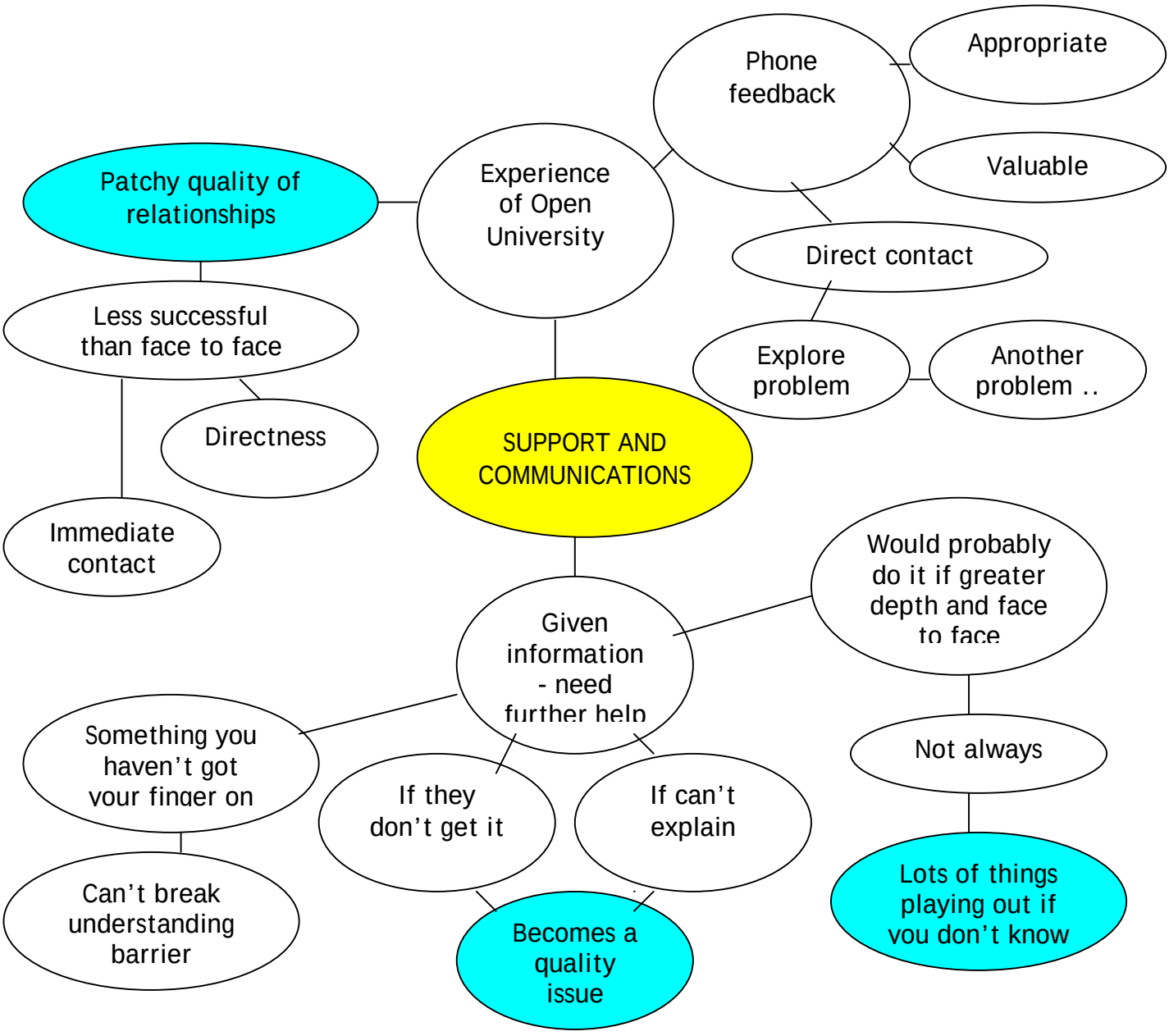
Tutor skills: some tutor perspectives



Support for distance learning in general; some tutor perspectives

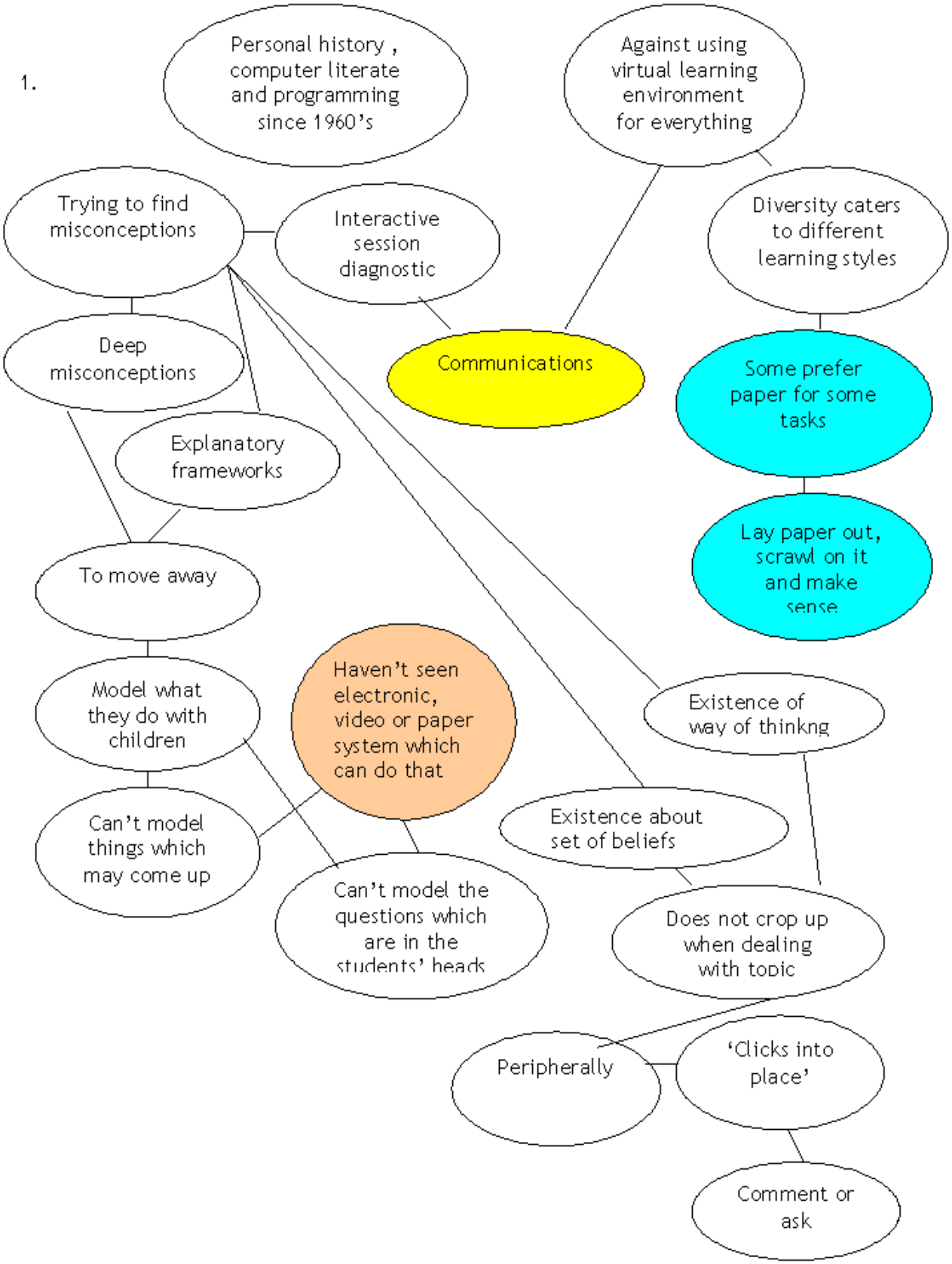


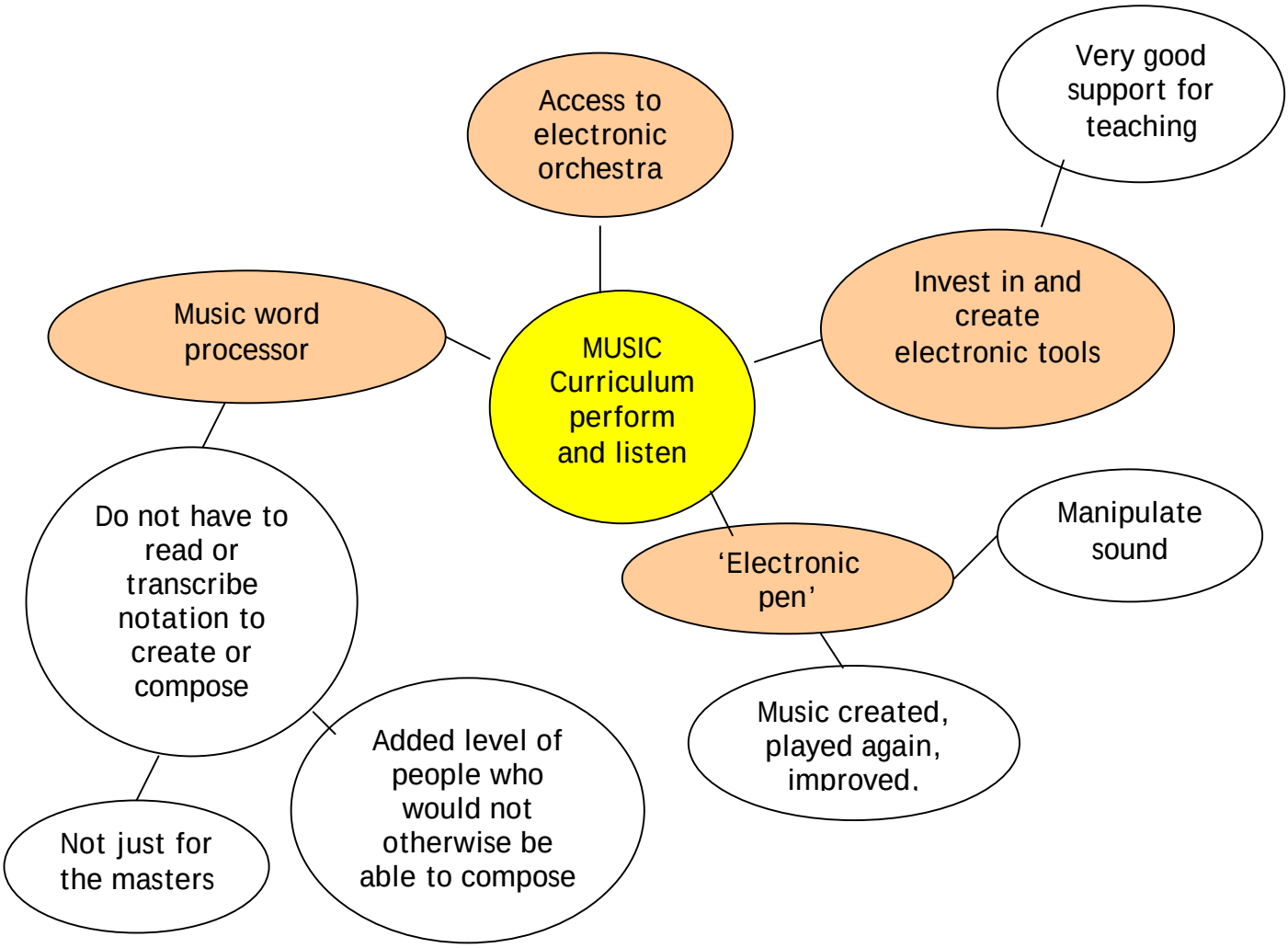
Support and communications: some tutor perspectives



Challenges for tutors: some tutor perspectives

Conceptual challenges: some tutor perpsectives



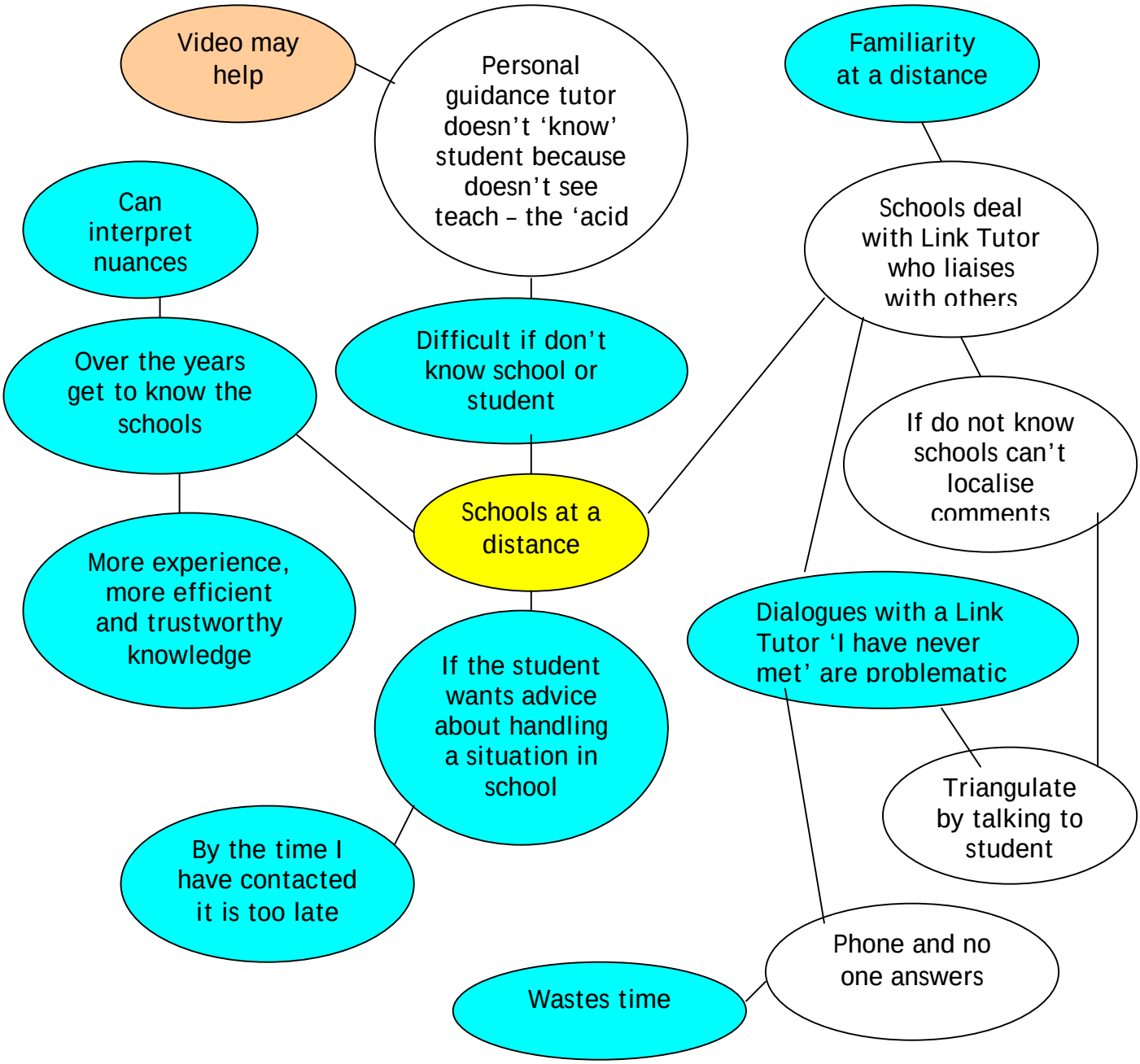

MUSIC
Curriculum
perform
and listen
Access to electronic orchestra
Very good support for teaching
Invest in and create electronic tools
Music word processor
Do not have to read or transcribe notation to create or compose
Not just for the masters
Added level of people who would not otherwise be able to compose
'Electronic pen'
Manipulate sound
Music created, played again, improved.

Peer group support

'It seems to me that teacher education is a very emotionally and personally demanding to enter into. I don't know that it is that academically demanding but you have to deal with an enormous range of knowledge in different subjects. It is very easy to start feeling inadequate if you have a bad day in school or whatever. I have been very aware over the years of the extent to which the students – the full time students – rely on each other. Just on the bus going back from a day in school, or something like that. They can have a good moan at each other, and reassure each other and pop round and have a cup of coffee with each other or something stronger, if necessary afterwards. I am very conscious that the distance learning students don't have that network, that lifeline.'

Schools at a distance

Tutors pointed to various potential problems associated with their role in relation to schools which are geographically distant



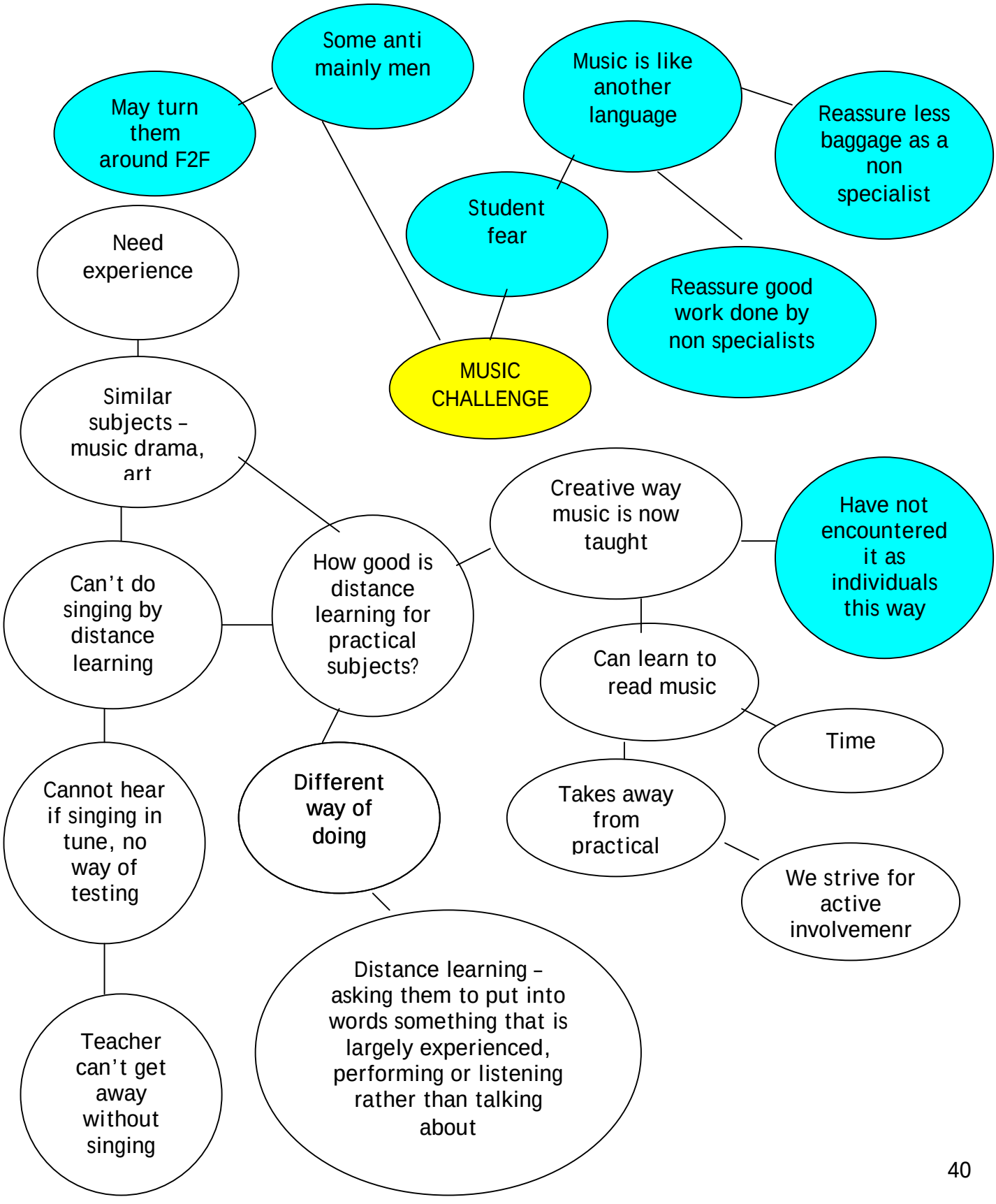
The debate over coursework design

Involving the students in applications and requiring them to respond to practical challenges poses additional problems in a distance learning context, and is likely to imply extra resources to overcome the lack of face to face demonstration and interaction. Some tutors suggested that practical subjects such as drama, art, music, design technology pose particular problems for distance learning. Assessment in such subjects is considered to be particularly challenging. The learning experience is multi sensual and complex, and solutions are likely to be multi-media and cutting edge. For example interactive games scenarios to develop practical expertise are being piloted in new areas and are already in use in medical training. The initial development of high tech developments is research intensive and requires substantial initial investment. One tutor suggested that not only is face to face the most effective medium for learning but that some activities cannot be achieved at a distance. For example, live musical performances when the players are in different locations requires a sensitivity of interaction which is beyond the grasp of the best video-conferencing facilities.

There were contrasting sets of views about the potential and benefits of using electronic / multi-media communications for such subjects. 'Mind maps' from the interview data of two such tutors illustrate examples of some such differences. When 'pushing' for technology mediated learning, are some of these beliefs, grounded in professional craft knowledge, being sidelined without respect or reflection?

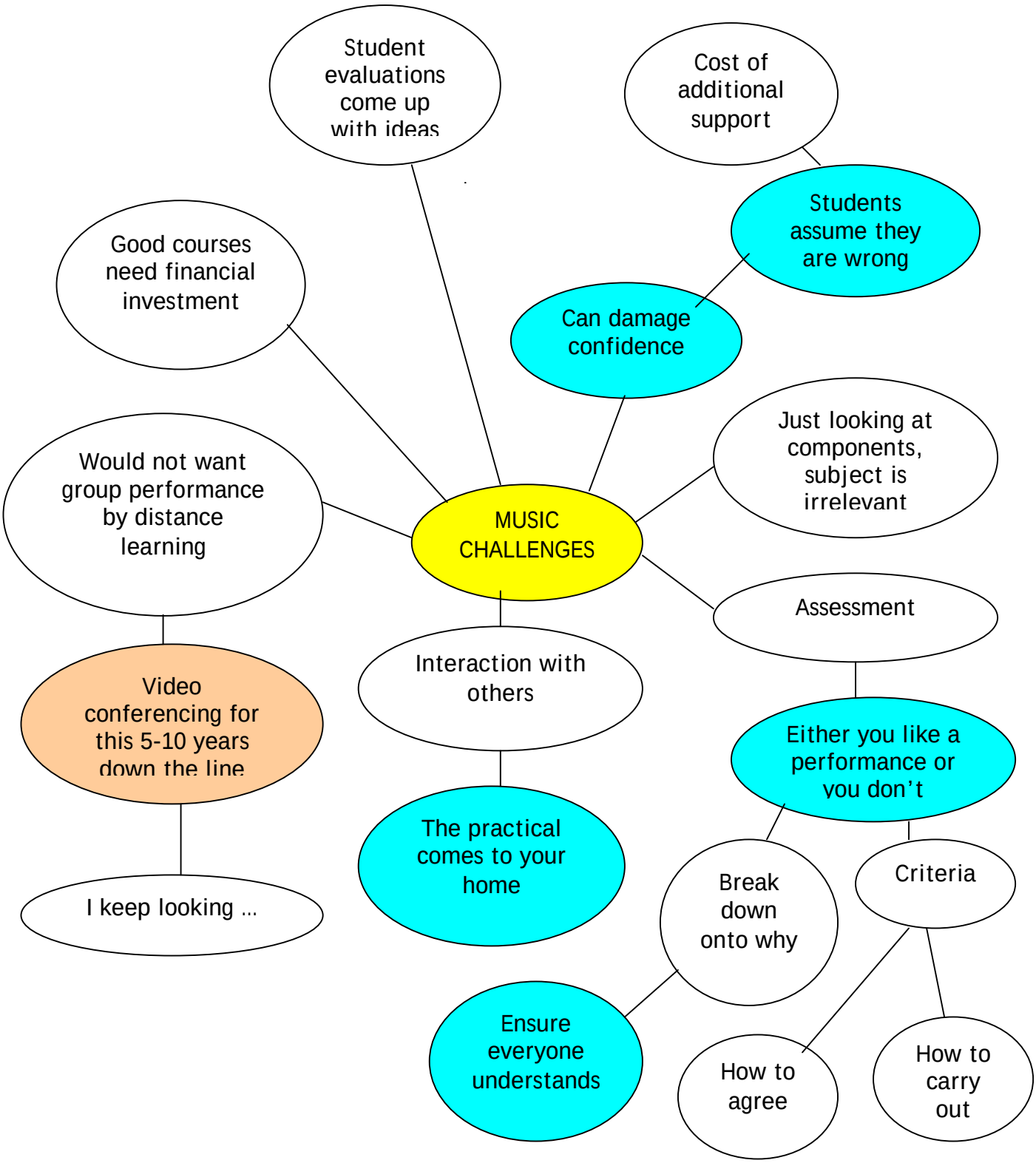
Tutor perspectives 1

This tutor describes a number of characteristics of music for programmes of initial teacher education for which face to face interaction appears more effective, and provides some reasons why.



Tutor perspectives 2

Another tutor sees technology mediated learning as of more benefit for a number of reasons, and perceives solutions to challenge in careful analysis, and structure of planning and materials



The quality assurance challenge: tutor perspectives

CONCLUSIONS

- The distance learning route – now flexible modular – to qualified status to teach enlarges access to mature students with young families and jobs.
- But there are challenges which are not present in traditional courses: an intense perceived need for formal and informal feedback and support from the higher education provider, and ways of overcoming feelings of isolation from peers.
- The technology used to mediate learning causes covert problems for some students and requires the diagnosis of appropriate kinds of support.
- The issue of whether or how far appropriate pedagogies for technology mediated learning can successfully meet such challenges is controversial.
- School placements at a distance add to the challenge of appropriate mentor support and feedback for students, especially in small geographically isolated primary schools.
- Careful structuring of the programme and pedagogy is required if workloads on staff are to be restrained.
- The type of student attracted to such a course are regarded as 'high calibre'.

APPENDIX: questionnaire returns

Questionnaire survey results

Course 1	All female
COHORT A	Average age 34
	50% had taken a distance learning course already
Course other	All but one female
COHORT B	Average age 39
	44% had taken a distance learning course already

	YOUR PERSONAL SITUATION	COHORT A n=29	Agree strongly 4	Agree mildly 3	Neither agree nor disagree 2	Disagree mildly 1	Disagree strongly 0	Average score	COHORT B n=18	Agree strongly 4	Agree mildly 3	Neither agree nor disagree 2	Disagree mildly 1	Disagree strongly 0	Average score
q1	Distance learning provides enough flexibility to combine lifestyle preferences with the course		71%	25%	0%	4%	0%	3.6		71%	18%	6%	6%	0%	3.5
q2	Distance learning provides enough flexibility to combine part time work with the course		25%	36%	25%	4%	11%	2.6		24%	41%	6%	18%	12%	2.5
q3	Distance learning provides enough flexibility to combine bringing up a family with the course		54%	29%	11%	0%	7%	3.2		39%	39%	11%	6%	6%	3.0
q4	Distance learning overcomes the barrier of distance from other types of course provision		36%	43%	18%	0%	4%	3.1		39%	28%	22%	6%	6%	2.9
q5	Mature distance learning students find that returning to study after a break is challenging		36%	29%	18%	7%	11%	2.7		33%	44%	11%	11%	0%	3.0
q6	Mature distance learning students have sufficient support to meet the challenges of returning to study before the course starts		7%	22%	48%	19%	4%	2.1		12%	18%	18%	41%	12%	***1.8***
q7	Without the distance learning course it would not have been possible to qualify to teach		54%	21%	11%	11%	4%	3.1		50%	28%	0%	6%	17%	2.9
q8	It would have not have been possible to do the course without the special PGCE grant		57%	21%	11%	4%	7%	3.2		67%	6%	6%	17%	6%	3.1

	SUPPORT FROM YOUR PEER GROUP	COHORT A n=29	Agree strongly 4	Agree mildly 3	Neither agree nor disagree 2	Disagree mildly 1	Disagree strongly 0	Average score	COHORT B n=18	Agree strongly 4	Agree mildly 3	Neither agree nor disagree 2	Disagree mildly 1	Disagree strongly 0	Average score
q9	Distance learning sometimes feel isolated and lonely		36%	32%	21%	4%	7%	2.9		33%	33%	17%	6%	11%	2.7
q10	Being able to share experiences informally with peers is beneficial for distance learning students		68%	32%	0%	0%	0%	3.7		61%	28%	11%	0%	0%	3.5
q11	If you meet the right people at the start of the course you will be more likely to keep in touch with them		64%	25%	11%	0%	0%	3.5		67%	22%	11%	0%	0%	3.6
q12	It is reassuring to know that you and your peers are 'all in the same boat' in meeting challenges during the course		75%	25%	0%	0%	0%	3.8		56%	28%	11%	6%	0%	3.3
q13	It helps you to progress if you can 'bounce off' ideas and exchange 'tips' with peers		64%	29%	7%	0%	0%	3.6		61%	22%	11%	6%	0%	3.4
q14	It is beneficial to be able to check if you are 'on the right lines' with peers		71%	21%	7%	0%	0%	3.6		67%	22%	6%	6%	0%	3.5
q15	You feel better if you can share good and bad experiences on school placement with your peers		78%	19%	4%	0%	0%	3.7		61%	28%	6%	6%	0%	3.4
q16	Coursework queries can often be effectively resolved by talking to a peer rather than a tutor		36%	39%	21%	0%	4%	3.0		39%	33%	17%	11%	0%	3.0
q17	You can share things with peers that you would not want to share with course tutors or teachers in school		46%	36%	14%	4%	0%	3.3		44%	22%	17%	6%	11%	2.8
q18	Distance learners have not enough time to contact peers		14%	29%	18%	32%	7%	2.1		28%	17%	22%	17%	17%	2.2
q19	Distance learners can manage on their own without a peer group		14%	14%	29%	25%	18%	***1.8***		17%	17%	17%	44%	6%	***1.9***
q20	Contact with peers can make you feel worse and undermine your confidence		4%	11%	18%	21%	46%	***1.0***		0%	11%	11%	50%	28%	***1.1***

	FEEDBACK AND SUPPORT FROM TUTORS ON THE COURSE	COHORT A n=29	Agree strongly 4	Agree mildly 3	Neither agree nor disagree 2	Disagree mildly 1	Disagree strongly 0	Average score	COHORT B n=18	Agree strongly 4	Agree mildly 3	Neither agree nor disagree 2	Disagree mildly 1	Disagree strongly 0	Average score
q21	From the start of the course it was clear who students should approach about different aspects of the course and how this should be done		7%	21%	18%	43%	11%	***1.7***		22%	33%	5.6%	16.7%	22.2%	2.2
q22	Prompt, detailed written feedback tailored to coursework is always valuable but especially for distance learning		82%	11%	4%	0%	4%	3.7		83%	11%	0.0%	0.0%	5.6%	3.7
q23	Distance learning students have sufficient reassurance from tutors about whether coursework is on the 'right lines'		21%	36%	4%	21%	18%	2.2		39%	17%	11%	11%	22%	2.4
q24	Prompt written feedback tailored to coursework is most valuable at the start of the course		50%	39%	11%	0%	0%	3.4		56%	22%	22%	0%	0%	3.3
q25	Written feedback from tutors is closely related to individual understanding and capabilities		21%	36%	25%	7%	11%	2.5		28%	44%	22%	0%	6%	2.9
q26	Written feedback from tutors is closely enough geared to 'standards' and official benchmarks for 'good teaching'		11%	39%	32%	11%	7%	2.4		39%	39%	6%	6%	11%	2.9
q27	Without detailed feedback on coursework it would be difficult to meet assessment criteria		25%	39%	29%	7%	0%	2.8		78%	17%	0%	6%	0%	3.7
q28	More coursework is required than is needed to meet the standards required to teach		11%	7%	39%	21%	21%	***1.6***		33%	6%	56%	0%	6%	2.6
q29	It is a waste of time doing coursework which does not contribute towards grades		7%	7%	18%	36%	32%	***1.2***		6%	11%	39%	22%	22%	***1.6***
q30	It would be beneficial to have more face to face discussions with tutors		37%	33%	15%	7%	7%	2.9		19%	31%	31%	19%	0%	2.5
q31	It would be beneficial to have more telephone discussions with tutors		15%	22%	33%	26%	4%	2.2		35%	18%	24%	18%	6%	2.6
q32	It would be beneficial to have more personal email discussions with tutors		14%	18%	39%	21%	7%	2.1		39%	22%	28%	11%	0%	2.9
q33	College tutors have been the main source of support and feedback on the course		18%	36%	7%	32%	7%	2.3		17%	39%	11%	17%	17%	2.2
q34	Students do not get to know tutors well enough to approach them about minor issues		21%	36%	18%	11%	14%	2.4		33%	22%	22%	17%	6%	2.6
q35	Students do not get to know tutors well enough to approach them about a personal crisis which may damage course progress		18%	21%	14%	25%	21%	***1.9***		22%	6%	28%	28%	17%	***1.9***
q36	On a distance learning course it is expected that personal contact with tutors is minimal		11%	32%	18%	25%	14%	2.0		17%	39%	17%	22%	6%	2.4

	YOUR MENTOR(S) AND OR CLASS TEACHERS ON SCHOOL PLACEMENT	COHORT A n=29	Agree strongly 4	Agree mildly 3	Neither agree nor disagree 2	Disagree mildly 1	Disagree strongly 0	Average score	COHORT B n=18	Agree strongly 4	Agree mildly 3	Neither agree nor disagree 2	Disagree mildly 1	Disagree strongly 0	Average score
q37	It is difficult to be prepared for the real experience of teaching on school placement		36%	25%	7%	21%	11%	2.5		17%	33%	28%	17%	6%	2.4
q38	Support is particularly important at the beginning of school placement		86%	14%	0%	0%	0%	3.9		61%	33%	6%	0%	0%	3.6
q39	A bad experience with a difficult class can dent your confidence to teach if there is little support and encouragement from the class teacher		79%	18%	0%	4%	0%	3.7		67%	28%	6%	0%	0%	3.6
q40	Class teachers in school are the main source of individual support and feedback on the course		54%	21%	14%	7%	4%	3.1		56%	28%	11%	6%	0%	3.3
q41	Day to day informal feedback and constructive support for teaching is very important for developing teaching capability		86%	14%	0%	0%	0%	3.9		67%	33%	0%	0%	0%	3.7
q42	Most mentors give adequate feedback and support to student teachers		25%	50%	11%	11%	4%	2.8		33%	39%	17%	6%	6%	2.9
q43	Most class teachers (where different) give adequate feedback and support to student teachers		29%	54%	7%	7%	4%	3.0		29%	59%	6%	6%	0%	3.1
q44	Most mentors (or if the same class teachers) discuss the formal assessment on school placement with the student		32%	46%	11%	11%	0%	3.0		50%	33%	11%	6%	0%	3.3
q45	Informal support and feedback to students is consistent across different schools		11%	4%	4%	32%	50%	0.9		6%	28%	11%	33%	22%	***1.6***
q46	Most schools are well prepared to support students to meet the requirements of the course provider		4%	32%	21%	29%	14%	***1.8***		11%	33%	28%	17%	11%	2.2
q47	Schools have to provide extra support for some students because of the geographical distance from the course provider		7%	11%	46%	11%	25%	***1.6***		6%	28%	56%	11%	0%	2.3
q48	Formal assessment is consistent across block placements		7%	18%	7%	29%	39%	***1.3***		6%	39%	17%	28%	11%	2.0
q49	Tutors offer students an opportunity to discuss the formal assessment by the school afterwards		11%	21%	11%	25%	32%	***1.5***		28%	17%	22%	28%	6%	2.3
q50	Previous work experience helps students to gain confidence to teach with less support		32%	39%	29%	0%	0%	3.0		56%	33%	6%	0%	6%	3.3
q51	The experience of bringing up children helps students to gain confidence to teach with less support		71%	0%	24%	0%	6%	3.3		50%	0%	36%	14%	0%	2.9
q52	Distance learners quickly establish good relationships as colleagues with teachers in school and this enhances support		36%	32%	29%	0%	4%	3.0		33%	28%	33%	6%	0%	2.9

	COMPUTERS AND ELECTRONIC COMMUNICATIONS FOR FEEDBACK AND SUPPORT	COHORT A n=29	Agree strongly 4	Agree mildly 3	Neither agree nor disagree 2	Disagree mildly 1	Disagree strongly 0	Average score	COHORT B n=18	Agree strongly 4	Agree mildly 3	Neither agree nor disagree 2	Disagree mildly 1	Disagree strongly 0	Average score
q53	Some distance learning students have problems with computers or electronic communication and this slows course progress		18%	36%	29%	4%	14%	2.4		22%	28%	22%	6%	22%	2.2
q54	Students have prior computer qualifications but lack of practice leads to problems on the course		7%	21%	36%	25%	11%	***1.9***		11%	28%	33%	6%	22%	2.0
q55	Most computer problems are specific and on the spot discussion is needed to overcome them		7%	32%	46%	11%	4%	2.3		22%	28%	50%	0%	0%	2.7
q56	Electronic communications are not as effective for feedback and support as phone or face-to-face meetings		29%	29%	4%	29%	11%	2.4		11%	11%	17%	22%	39%	***1.3***
q57	Electronic communications are helpful because everyone can respond when it is convenient		39%	57%	0%	0%	4%	3.3		44%	50%	0%	0%	6%	3.3
q58	Electronic communications enable access to most resources and make the course much easier to follow		29%	43%	11%	14%	4%	2.8		28%	50%	0%	11%	11%	2.7