

The Relationship between Distance Students' Health Risk and  
Health-Promoting Behaviours, Stress, Strain, Coping and  
Academic Outcomes

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**Certification of Thesis**

I certify that the work contained in this thesis is original and that it contains no material written by another person, except where otherwise acknowledged. I also certify that the material has not been previously published, except where otherwise acknowledged, or submitted for any other award at any other higher education institution.

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### **Abstract**

Studying by distance can pose both social and academic challenges for students. The unique experience of distance study as well as balancing family and work may contribute to students' stress and strains, and subsequently influence their ability to cope. In turn, this has the potential to contribute to, or exacerbate health and social problems. Previous research with on-campus students has found that students' engagement in health-promoting behaviours may mediate stressors and strains. Despite this, little is known about the relationships between health behaviours, stressors, strains and coping, and academic outcomes, specifically in relation to distance students.

The purpose of this doctoral research was fourfold: (a) to examine the relationship between distance students' health risk and health-promoting behaviours and stressors, strains, coping and academic outcomes, (b) to examine the cohort differences between distance students and on-campus students in relation to study variables, (c) to explore distance students' perceptions of their stressors, strains and coping, and the role of health behaviours in coping, and (d) to explore distance students' perceptions of the university's role in supporting their health. Two models formed the basis of this research; the health promotion model, and the transactional model of stress and coping.

This study was designed with two main phases using a mixed-method design, each involving students from the University of Southern Queensland (USQ). Phase 1 consisted of two quantitative stages. First, an online health survey was pilot tested with 73 USQ Nursing students. The intention was to test the reliability and validity of study measures and obtain feedback from students about the survey tool itself. The pilot testing phase informed the development of an online health survey implemented in the second quantitative stage.

Second, students across discipline areas, faculties and program levels completed an online health survey. This included 766 students including 270 on-campus and 496 distance

students. The main aim of this study was to examine the relationships between socio-demographic variables, general health and psychological variables on students' engagement in health behaviours. Additionally, the study examined the role that stressors, strains and coping played in predicting student academic outcomes.

The results indicated that age did not correlate across many study variables, and little difference was found between on-campus and distance students with respect to gender. Psychological distress was a significant predictor of stress, strain and coping and academic outcomes; whereas health-promoting behaviours related more strongly with student coping. A theoretical model was developed to test which health variables best predicted student stress, strain, coping and academic outcomes. The model indicated that whilst health-promoting behaviours did not have a direct relationship with academic outcomes, they did account for a large amount of variance in student coping, mediating between student stress and strain, regardless of study mode.

Phase 2 used a qualitative approach involving seven distance students. Semi-structured interviews were used to explore the experiences of distance students, with a specific focus on health and coping. Of interest was how they saw the role of health-promoting behaviours in their coping. Furthermore, these interviews sought to explore distance students' perceptions of the role of the university in supporting their health.

The findings from the qualitative research indicated a variety of challenges related to distance study, including social and academic stressors and strains. For example, students discussed the challenges around time pressures in juggling demands of family, work and study, and navigating the online environment. Despite these challenges, students often used proactive strategies such as time management strategies and health-promoting behaviours, as part of their coping repertoire to buffer the effects of stress.

Given the importance of health-promoting behaviours (nutrition, physical activity, stress management, spiritual growth, interpersonal relations, and health responsibility) in distance students' coping, these should be activity promoted. This should include the development of online strategies which enhance these behaviours within the context of overall student coping, information and advice built into students' transition strategies to their online study, and the provision of information and advice by USQ Student Services. This was supported by distance students themselves perceived the university to play a key role in supporting their health, specifically including the provision of health information, support services, recreational opportunities, and support with academic issues within an online learning environment.

Overall, this study has contributed to the body of knowledge by providing new insights into the role that health-promoting behaviours play in stress, strain and coping and academic outcomes for distance students. This presents an alternative view of how positive influences such as engaging in healthy behaviours, may influence students' ability to cope, and in turn their academic outcomes. This knowledge also contributes to new insights into how these behaviours may contribute to a positive study and work life balance.

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