

# Distance Students as Virtual Migrants: A Case Study from Atlantic Canada

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*Distance learners are typically excluded from discussions of student mobility. This paper explores distance student choices and experiences, drawing on a study that included students who enrolled in distance education courses at a university outside of their home province. Findings from this study suggest that program and course considerations such as quality, accessibility, and reputation were of primary importance to distance learners. Program cost was also found to be influential in students' decision-making. Overall, this study adds to the current literature on distance student enrolment choices, experiences, and expectations. It makes a significant contribution in identifying factors that may result in students' enrolment in distance education outside of their home region, and that should be considered in university recruitment initiatives.*

*Typiquement, les apprenants à distance sont exclus des discussions sur la mobilité des étudiants. Cet article explore les choix et les expériences des étudiants à distance en puisant dans une étude qui a inclus des étudiants inscrits à des cours à distance offerts par une université située dans une province autre que la leur. Les résultats portent à croire que, par rapport aux programmes et aux cours, les apprenants à distance tiennent surtout compte de la qualité, l'accessibilité et la réputation. Le coût des programmes entre également en ligne de compte dans le choix de cours par les apprenants. Globalement, cette étude ajoute à la documentation existante sur les choix de cours, les expériences et les attentes des étudiants à distance. Elle contribue de manière importante à l'identification des facteurs qui pourraient entraîner l'inscription par des étudiants à des cours ailleurs que dans leur région de résidence et dont devraient tenir compte les initiatives de recrutement à l'université.*

## Introduction

To date, limited research has explored postsecondary student migration in the Canadian context, particularly with regards to the role of distance education in changing enrolment patterns. This paper focuses on the decision-making processes and experiences of “virtual migrants,” defined as students who enrol in distance education outside of their home area. Findings are drawn from a study that included students from the Maritime Provinces who enrolled in distance education at Memorial University of Newfoundland (MUN). An overview of distance education in the Canadian postsecondary system is given, followed by a brief review of the research on distance learners, and a brief review of Canadian student migration trends. Social reproduction theories and student choice models are used to explore the postsecondary decision-making process with a focus on identifying factors that influence students' decision to

enrol in a postsecondary program of study as a distance student.

### **Distance Education in the Canadian Postsecondary System**

Historically, Canadian distance education included correspondence courses, courses delivered over the radio and television, and tele-learning for use by adult learners (Canadian Council on Learning, 2009). Tele-learning, involving the use of audio- or video-tapes or teleconferencing, was sometimes supplemented by computer-mediated communications and the use of e-mail (Crocker & Usher, 2006). Course management software programs, such as WebCT, later aided in facilitating the integration of course components. Canada initially emerged as a leader in e-learning (Crocker & Usher, 2006); the proportion of postsecondary education courses delivered online is among the highest in countries studied by the OECD (Canadian Council on Learning, 2009). According to the Canadian Council on Learning (2009), only limited data is available regarding participation in e-learning within Canadian postsecondary institutions. The available evidence, however, suggests that the provision of and registration in e-learning is gaining momentum in Canada.

Newfoundland and Labrador has achieved an international reputation in distance education, particularly for the creative and cost-effective delivery of programs and services (Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, 2005). MUN has a long-standing tradition of excellence in distance education and has been recognized as one of the few Canadian institutions to have made an effective transition to e-learning (Crocker & Usher, 2006). MUN's Distance Education, Learning and Teaching Support (DELTS) has seen significant growth over the past number of years. From 2001 to 2010, the number of students enrolled in DELTS courses rose by 64.6% (MUN, 2011).

DELTS has also been recognized both nationally and internationally as the recipient of numerous awards. In 2010, DELTS was recognized by the Institute for Public Administration in Canada (IPAC) as a bronze level recipient of the Deloitte Public Sector Leadership Award in the education category (Wicks, 2010). In 2011, DELTS won a total of 18 awards from several organizations in recognition for partnerships and collaborations, animation, video production, student services, innovation, marketing and communications, classroom design, and program excellence (Alcock, 2011).

### **Distance Learners in Postsecondary Education**

Distance learners in postsecondary programs tend to be older, more self-directed, and more autonomous (Barbour & Reeves, 2009; Kennedy, 2000), characteristics that are advantageous to succeeding in the virtual learning environment. While a substantial amount of research has been conducted on the experiences of distance e-learners in postsecondary education, a limited number of studies have explored student perceptions of online delivery of coursework.

Research examining postsecondary students' satisfaction with online learning has produced mixed findings. Some analyses have found few differences in student feedback on online versus traditional face-to-face learning (Maki, Maki, Patterson, & Whittaker, 2000; Tolmie & Boyle, 2000). Other studies reveal high levels of online course satisfaction due to perceptions of a quality learning experience (Leonard & Guha, 2001; Wyatt, 2005); while still others suggest students have a preference for face-to-face learning when choice of study mode and level of course satisfaction was examined (Hagel & Shaw, 2010; Maki & Maki, 2002).

Recent Canadian research shows that students are less satisfied with classes using higher levels of e-resources, and are less likely to indicate that they learned more than in classes with no e-resources (Kaznowska, Rogers, & Usher, 2011). Format and type of course delivery has been found to affect students' experiences of learning and socializing, as well as time and place flexibility (Hagel & Shaw, 2010). Given trends toward distance education, study mode is likely to become an increasingly important criterion in students' postsecondary decision-making (Kulchitsky, 2008). This is important to consider given that theories of student choice assume face-to-face delivery (Hagel & Shaw, 2010).

### **Inter-provincial Student Migration in Canada**

Canadian student mobility and migration trends have received considerable attention in recent years. Emerging patterns of student transitions in, through, and out of postsecondary education are of increasing importance to educational administrators and policymakers since knowledge of how students move across and between education systems can play an important role in the sustainability of programs and institutions. Despite an increasing global interest in the causes and consequences of student mobility patterns, however, there is little information about student transitions through Canada's postsecondary systems (Council of Ministers of Education, Canada, 2009; Junor & Usher, 2008). According to the National Graduates' Survey, 9% of Canadian postsecondary graduates completed their program in a province other than the one where they resided prior to enrolling. Students were most likely to leave Nova Scotia (18%), New Brunswick (18%), Newfoundland and Labrador (20%), and Prince Edward Island (36%) (Statistics Canada, 2008).

There has been comparatively little exploration into the role of distance education in student mobility. It has been noted that one's willingness to relocate for the purposes of pursuing a postsecondary program is influenced by factors similar to those that influence postsecondary aspirations and choices in general. Research conducted on what we have labelled as "virtual migrants" is scarce. This study of postsecondary choices and experiences contributes to our understanding of this unique group of students.

### **Maritime Student Migration to Newfoundland and Labrador**

In the fall 2010 semester, 1,612 of MUN's 17,770 students were residents of the nearby Maritime Provinces (MUN, 2011). Little more than a decade earlier, just 137 Maritime students attended MUN out of a total of 12,864 students (MUN, 2000). Prior to 2005-2006, enrolment at public universities in the Maritime region grew or remained stable for over two decades. A subsequent decline in enrolment at these institutions has been partly attributed to the migration of Maritimers to Newfoundland and Labrador to attend MUN (Maritime Provinces Higher Education Commission, 2009).

A recent report identified a correlation between lower tuition fees and the increased enrolment of undergraduate students from the Maritimes at Memorial (Maritime Provinces Higher Education Commission, 2007). Attention has also been drawn to this presumed connection in the popular media (Attention students: It's cheaper out east, 2007; DeHaas, 2011; Lower tuitions in N.L. draw Maritime students to Memorial University, 2008; McMillan, 2009), and is supported by the fact that provincial and institutional policies have given rise to considerable differences between university tuition fees in the Maritime provinces. Inflation-

adjusted tuition fees rose across the Maritime provinces between the 1999-2000 and 2009-2010 academic years, while dropping by 37.4% at MUN over the same period (Statistics Canada, 2011).

While acknowledging and seeking to confirm or refute a supposed connection between tuition fees and the enrolment of students from the Maritime provinces at Memorial University, this study also sought to explore other factors that may influence students' choice of institution when participating in distance education courses and programs at the undergraduate level.

### **Postsecondary Aspirations and Choices**

Differences in postsecondary participation behaviours between youths of differing socio-economic backgrounds have been accounted for in part using the theories of social reproduction. The notion of habitus, defined as "a system of durable, transposable dispositions" that pre-dispose individuals to think and act in particular ways, is highly relevant to students' academic intentions and ambitions (Bourdieu, 1979). One's habitus is a product of individual and collective past experiences, and is shaped over time across contexts and circumstances. For high school students who are preparing to graduate and considering their career options, the disposition toward or against choosing to study at the postsecondary level is a product of their social class, values, culture, and identity.

The formation of habitus is also closely associated with the concept of social capital, which, according to Bourdieu (1979, 1986), facilitates the transaction and transmission of information among individuals through their relationships and increases one's ability to advance her or his interests. Those who have access to information about postsecondary education through their social networks are at an advantage when making decisions about postsecondary options. The role of social networks, such as family and friends, has been explored in recent research on the transnational migration of university students in the United Kingdom (Brooks & Waters, 2010; 2011). A correlation has been found between institutional and class habitus, individual choice-making, and cultural and social capital (Brooks, 2008; Reay, David & Ball, 2005).

Postsecondary choices have also been linked to parental educational attainment and family income levels: lower parental educational attainment levels and family incomes reduce the probability of university attendance (Bell & Anisef, 2005; Educational Policy Institute, 2008). Students from more affluent backgrounds are more likely than lower-status youth to pursue postsecondary studies and higher-status youth are more likely to attend university rather than other types of postsecondary education such as community colleges or private institutions.

Some researchers have developed a number of models that attempt to explain students' postsecondary decision-making process. Among the more frequently cited is Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) conceptual model, which identifies three key stages of postsecondary choice decisions: predisposition, search, and choice. In the predisposition stage, grade school students consider the possibility of postsecondary education. During the search stage, in which parents often play an influential role, students refine their options, develop preferences, and consider issues such as qualifications for admission to a program and options for covering the associated program costs. In the final stage, the choice phase, institutional and program choices are impacted by a variety of social and economic factors.

Ross (2010) expanded upon Hossler and Gallagher's model, adding components of Perna's (2006) conceptual model of students' situated context. Perna's model combines aspects of the economic theory of human capital and sociological notions of social and cultural capital,

acknowledging that an individual's postsecondary choices are influenced by multiple layers of context. The Perna-Ross model offers an insightful view of postsecondary education choice and has implications for college and university retention, and was chosen as a conceptual lens from which to examine the postsecondary aspirations and choices of students' enrolled at institutions outside of their home province.

### **Research Objectives**

This study used data from a research project that was conducted to provide a better understanding of changes in enrolment patterns among Maritime Canadian students and to provide a contextualized account of the reasons why increasing numbers of these students choose to pursue studies at MUN. Three of the objectives of the study were directly applicable to this distance student analysis. The first objective was to explore the types of academic programs selected by Maritime students who choose to study via distance education at MUN. The second objective was to examine how academic, social, and economic factors, such as background, ability, influence of others, and educational aspirations, influenced Maritime students' enrolment decisions. The third objective was to examine of how Maritime students at MUN found out about, considered, and chose amongst options for studies at the postsecondary level. This study contributes to the existing literature on the postsecondary decision-making process, with an emphasis on students enrolled in distance education offerings, while suggesting possible reasons for student migration trends.

### **Research Methodology**

This study employed a mixed methods approach and was conducted in two phases. In the first phase, the Maritime students enrolled at MUN completed an online survey in the fall of 2010. These surveys were completed over a two-month period between September and November 2010. This was followed by a series of in-depth semi-structured interviews with a sub-sample of students, completed between January and March 2011.

**Study participants.** Study findings in this paper focus on participants who were enrolled in undergraduate online distance education courses, including transfer and second-entry students (i.e., students who previously completed an undergraduate degree). It included both full- and part-time students. In the fall 2010 semester, there were 171 distance students from the Maritimes enrolled at MUN (116 from Nova Scotia; 38 from New Brunswick; 17 from Prince Edward Island). One hundred and thirty seven of these completed the initial (Phase One) online survey for a response rate of 80.1%.

The second phase of in-depth interviews involved a randomly selected sub-sample from the distance group who had indicated an interest in participating in a follow-up interview at the time of completing the Phase One survey. A total of 32 students were interviewed.

**Data collection.** The survey questionnaire for Phase One was set up and distributed to students using a web-based interface that allowed students to respond to survey questions online (See Appendix A for survey questions). Students were initially contacted and invited to participate via email. They were informed that the research was an independent study being conducted at Memorial, their participation was voluntary, and any information provided would be kept confidential. A follow-up contact via telephone was used to further encourage participation. The survey was designed to elicit information from students regarding their

decision to study at Memorial, some of their experiences since enrolling, their reasons for studying at a distance, and their experiences in distance education courses at Memorial. The Phase Two interviews were conducted by telephone, audio-recorded using a digital recorder, and transcribed upon completion. These interviews were semi-structured, about 15 minutes long, and allowed for probing and follow-up questions from the interviewers (see Appendix B for interview script).

**Data analysis.** Data from the survey were analyzed using quantitative analysis software (SPSS) and transcribed interview data were coded by the researchers. This coded data was analyzed following a grounded theory approach and a constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) in order to identify the salient themes from participant responses. Initial coding was conducted independently by the researchers, themes were reviewed collectively, and categories were collapsed and/or expanded, depending on the findings. An example of themes that were collapsed together are “program availability” and “further career goals,” which were combined into the category “academic considerations.” A theme that was expanded was “practical reasons cited for attending Memorial,” which was broken down into separate categories such as “cost” and “flexibility.” This process continued until a final set of codes was determined. In order to triangulate across different sources of data collection, the interview data were cross-referenced with survey data.

### **Research Findings**

**Survey results.** Survey respondents were representative of the study population, based on the students’ Maritime province of origin. Most of the survey respondents originated from Nova Scotia (67.9%), while 22.6% came from New Brunswick and 9.5% were from Prince Edward Island. Over half were classified as “mature students” (aged 30 or older) and 58.4% were female. About one third were enrolled in first year studies and 83.2% were studying on a part-time basis. The two largest groups were enrolled in the Faculty of Arts (27%) and at the Marine Institute campus (24.8%). Over three quarters (78.1%) of the students surveyed indicated that MUN was their first choice of postsecondary institution. The second most commonly selected option was “No, another institution in home province” (9.5%), which suggests that some of them had considered enrolling in an institution closer to home.

**Factors influencing student choice.** Students were asked to rate 10 factors they considered when choosing a university. Responses were provided on a Likert scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being “not important at all” and 5 being “very important.” Overall, the five highest rated influences on choice based on mean scores were: “Availability of the program” (4.33), “Total cost” (4.02), “Memorial University’s reputation” (3.88), “Reputation of Newfoundland and Labrador” (2.95), and “Preparation for graduate school” (2.87). The mean ratings for each are found in Table 1.

Students were also asked to identify the factor that was *most* important to them in making an enrolment decision. The most frequently selected responses were “Availability of the program” (43%), “Total cost” (37%), and “Memorial University’s reputation” (11.9%).

**Experiences at Memorial University.** Students were given a series of statements about their experiences at MUN and asked to indicate their level of satisfaction with each on a 5-point Likert scale (with 1= strongly disagree). The mean ratings were: “The tuition fees I pay at Memorial University are reasonable” (4.47); “Overall, I am satisfied with my experience at Memorial University” (4.36); “I would recommend Memorial University to others” (4.56); and

Table 1

*Factors Considered by Distance Students When Choosing to Study at Memorial University*

Factors Considered When Choosing Memorial University	Mean Score*
Availability of the program	4.33
Total Cost	4.02
Memorial University's reputation	3.88
Reputation of Newfoundland and Labrador	2.95
Preparation for graduate school (e.g., Master's degree)	2.87
Distance of program/ institution from your home	2.63
Availability of financial aid based on your need (e.g., student loans)	2.19
Availability of scholarships	2.11
Distance from your friends or relatives	2.07
Availability of student housing (e.g., residence)	1.92

\* Students were asked to rate these factors on a Likert scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being "not important at all" and 5 being "very important."

"Overall, I am satisfied with the services available to out-of-province students at Memorial University" (4.15). When asked about their plans following completion of their current program of study, most students selected "Undecided" (34%), followed by "Enrol in another program at Memorial University" (26.5%).

**Experiences with distance courses.** Students were asked to respond to five statements about their learning experiences in distance courses, using the same 5-point Likert scale. Students tended to agree with each of the statements, suggesting that they regarded their distance course experiences to be positive. The mean scores on each were: "Overall, I am satisfied with distance education at Memorial University" (4.34); "I enjoy studying by distance" (4.02); "I would prefer distance education for courses I take in the future" (3.93); "I believe I can earn the same grade in distance and on-campus courses" (3.83); and "I believe I can learn the same amount in either distance or on-campus courses" (3.78).

**Importance of tuition fees in choosing Memorial.** Survey respondents were asked to rate the importance of tuition fees in their selection of MUN on a Likert scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being "not important at all" and 5 being "very important." The average rating was 3.94, indicating that tuition fees were of some importance.

## Interview results

**Selecting a postsecondary education option.** Students were asked about their use of institutional resources and services in their decision-making, with most indicating that they had used some form of program or service.

**Availability and accessibility.** A number of respondents indicated that it was the availability and accessibility of course and program offerings that had helped them to decide to attend MUN. Some noted the influence of others, such as friends, co-workers, other students, and alumni, on their decision. The following is representative of such a response:

It was actually someone who had already done the program that I know... we just happened to be chatting about it because I knew that he took my program and he got his [degree], so I guess that's sort of how I found about it in the first place.

A small number of students (3) mentioned that they attended career fairs; another noted pamphlets she had received in high school. One person said that the program was a job requirement, and another said that he was apprised through his work place.

**Postsecondary institution options.** The majority of respondents (22) indicated that they considered other postsecondary options before deciding on MUN. Institutions in Atlantic Canada were cited most frequently, followed by other institutions in Canada. Slightly less than one third of respondents (10) indicated that they did not consider other postsecondary options. It would appear that for students studying at a distance, the location of study was not a factor for most. As one participant noted:

It wasn't really a deciding factor... If I would've had something locally, I might've done it that way, but at the same time distance education with no classes—being able to do it when I wanted to was really the best choice for me at this point in my life.

**Academic and economic considerations.** Students were also asked to identify the factors that most influenced their decision to attend MUN. The two most common responses can be categorized into the themes of “academic” and “economic considerations.” Low cost was cited by a small majority of respondents, but it was usually mentioned alongside other factors, particularly academic considerations.

I mean, obviously cost is really important... but also so is... taking distance education that's engaging and important, so I can't say that I'd take something that I hated even if it was cheaper... So I think they're both equally important.

Another student commented that program and course considerations such as quality, accessibility, and reputation were of primary importance, particularly as these characteristics related to distance education.

Well, it is the quality of the distance education, so where prior it was cost and all that, now I'm working full time so I have money and all that, so now for me it's the quality and the accessibility and the ease of use of the distance education...

A few students (5) also highlighted the convenience of being able to complete courses from a distance as an important factor.

Well, distance education was huge, right?... So I could sit at home and I could do it right on my PC... I enjoyed that, but that's probably the main factor...

**Reputation of institution and location.** About a quarter of respondents (7) cited factors related to the reputation of MUN or the St. John's location. Knowing others who had attended the institution or hearing positive comments from others helped influence their decision.

I mean, Memorial just in general, from the people I've talked to, has a good reputation for, you know, courses in general and being a good school, so...



A few students (2) mentioned connections to the province, such as having family members here, but these people seem to have been more of a secondary influence after cost and program availability.

**Program cost.** Some respondents (4) did indicate that practical considerations, particularly cost, were the most important influence on their decision to attend Memorial. However, similar to responses given to previous questions, a number of students (11) mentioned cost alongside other factors. Some students (2) also commented that they could not afford the tuition fees at other universities and MUN provided them an opportunity to pursue a degree. Other respondents indicated their desire to achieve personal or career goals could be met. By contrast, six students noted that cost was not an important factor as they would either be reimbursed by their employer or had the funds to support themselves as a result of being employed. Students were also asked whether an increase in tuition or other university fees would cause them to reconsider their enrolment at MUN. Responses indicate that even with an increase, cost was not a primary incentive. A slight majority (20) of the distance students indicated that they would not reconsider their decision if this happened and a few noted the already low cost of attending MUN.

Well, it would. It would probably cause me to re-evaluate compared to other universities, but MUN is... I mean, it's nowhere near the other... you know, other universities are five times the tuition rate; so, I mean, even with the small increase I'm sure it would be fine, so... but it would cause me to re-evaluate, yes.

However, a small minority (3) of students indicated that "yes" they would reconsider their enrolment if tuition fees were raised and indicated that any reconsideration would depend on the extent of the increase and how the resultant cost compared to that of other institutions. However, there was an expressed reluctance to consider changing institutions unless an increase was substantial.

Well, it would cause me to look around...but, you know, when you're in a program it's not easy just to jump around so, you know, it would have to be significant, right?

**Experiences with distance education.** Students were asked several questions specifically related to their experiences with distance education. Distance students were generally positive and enthusiastic about their experiences taking online courses at MUN and indicated that they had not experienced any significant difficulties in their courses.

So far it's been an excellent experience... You know, through distance education it's so easy to take...a course a semester and kind of chip away at something, and I really enjoy it...

Students held diverse perspectives on the quality of instruction and support services, however, were exemplified by the following comments:

There's a lot of support so, even though it's distance, I'm getting as much support... or, actually, maybe more than if I was going in person...

I don't know if I necessarily feel that I am connected to any sort of student services...maybe it would be nicer if I felt that there was a little bit better service for distance students...

A few students (3) cited concerns about online course navigation and occasional scheduling and technical problems that limited access and full course participation. Several students (7) noted areas for improvement; these typically concerned poor communication and the importance of promptness with regards to receiving feedback. A few students (3) raised concerns about coursework, such as having a higher workload than expected as well as unanticipated course requirements.

I think it takes more time than I thought. Like I thought I might be able to take two courses at a time on top of my full-time job, but there's no way I would ever consider that now.

**Choice of distance education.** Almost half of the respondents (14) indicated that they chose distance courses to help accommodate their different individual life situations, such as family responsibilities and/or work:

I've got a large family, six kids, and I work full time, so the flexibility of the distance program really appealed to me.

Convenience... I could work. I could be at home. I could do whatever I wanted to from my community and still have time to do the course...

Other practical reasons that students gave were quite varied, and ranged from personal or geographic limitations, such as not being able to attend due to the distance from an institution or personal disability or illness. A few students (4) cited academic reasons for completing distance education. For example, their distance university courses fit with or complemented a previous college education. Other reasons cited for taking distance courses included career or educational advancement and meeting program requirements.

**Preference for face-to-face.** When asked whether they preferred taking courses delivered via distance or face-to-face, almost half of students (15) stated a preference for learning face-to-face as opposed to distance learning. A third of these students (5) stated that they enjoyed the level of interaction that is possible in the "real" classroom as opposed to the "virtual" one.

If I had a choice, I would prefer in classroom... Just for the interaction; and if you have a question, you can ask it right away...

However, a few respondents (3) noted that they also liked distance courses, despite a preference for face-to-face. Convenience was often cited as a reason.

I guess I would rather be in the classroom, but I very much enjoy the distance also... It's hard to say. There's pros and cons to both, I guess... by being able to do it online I saved a lot of money for accommodations—in that way since I didn't have to leave my home to do this.

It is notable that a significant minority (13) of interview participants indicated that they prefer courses delivered via distance. Most (10) reiterated course flexibility and convenience as well as the ability to complete courses at their own pace without having to physically attend classes.

I prefer distance... I guess because I'm self-motivated, and I like the convenience of it, and I don't have a set time that I have to be at a certain place.

Yeah, the flexibility part of it definitely is an advantage... it works around my lifestyle—you know, around work, around kids, around other obligations. You can fit it in there, whereas having to run off to a class. Everything has to come to a halt to get to that class so, you know, the distance education has definitely benefits that way.

Other students (2) mentioned the ability to be self-directed as a result of less interaction along with the anonymity that distance allows.

**Disadvantages of distance education.** Students also highlighted a number of disadvantages to distance courses. Many respondents (15) cited specific disadvantages related to the lack of direct communication or interaction with instructors and classmates. A few (3) students mentioned the struggle of being self-disciplined, particularly as a result of the lack of face-to-face interaction and direct faculty guidance.

Yeah, lack of faculty, like face-to-face interaction. Even though I know that there are web boards and message boards to message and post questions and whatnot, it's still not the same as having that person in front of you; and also if you're not diligent about keeping on schedule, you can easily get behind on the work...

**Characteristics of an ideal university distance course.** When asked to describe what they would consider the nature of an ideal distance course, about half of participants (16) cited academic course delivery processes that used effective communication and interaction, including receiving prompt responses and feedback from professors.

That the teacher is interactive in the course, like approachable; answers your questions or whatever. That makes a difference... I like the ones that are interactive... The one I'm taking now, the professor is always there... every week he puts on guidelines for reading, so the readings we did that week, he posts his comments on it, so I like that.

Other responses related to increased flexibility and accessibility, such as having easy to navigate course websites, making requirements and objectives clear to students, being more flexible and less restrictive with timelines, and making information accessible before the course begins.

## Discussion

Distance students and “virtual migration” have typically been excluded from discussions of university student migration. This study provides valuable insight into the underlying reasons why students “virtually migrate” from one jurisdiction to another. It also contributes to our understanding of this unique group of learners and the factors that influence their study decisions. These findings are of local, regional, and international relevance, and may assist in the development of marketing strategies for recruiting out-of-region students to postsecondary institutions using distance education program offerings. Future research should explore the experiences of “virtual migrants” and the factors surrounding students’ decision-making process regarding enrolment in distance courses outside of their home province or region.

As in any study, it was anticipated that there would be limitations that could restrict data collection and/or the analysis and interpretation of the findings. An increased sample size or different process for interviews would have been helpful in capturing a greater depth and breadth of student experiences as related to the study questions. A second series of in-depth interviews could have provided an opportunity for the researchers to follow-up on the initial interview findings and learn more about students' subsequent experiences.

It is evident from this study that accessible distance education programs with a positive reputation can attract students from other regions, can influence their postsecondary choices, and are important factors when students consider attending one institution compared to another. University recruitment efforts should emphasize a continued focus on these attributes, which may prove beneficial to long-term program sustainability. Low cost was a definite attraction and likely an influence in tandem with other factors affecting student decision-making.

The nature and characteristics of distance learners in the sample were typical of those cited in the literature (Barbour & Reeves, 2009; Kennedy, 2000) with a profile somewhat different from on-campus students. Distance students often enrol on a part-time basis and are typically older than students who choose to pursue full-time studies on campus. It is suggested that further theoretical consideration be given to the factors that influence non-traditional students, and distance students in particular, in the postsecondary decision-making process. Existing theories of student choice, such as those proposed by Hossler and Gallagher (1987), Perna (2006), and Ross (2010) are more relevant for students engaged in programs that are delivered face-to-face. These choice models need to be adapted to better reflect non-traditional student experiences that encompass distance education.

Our findings indicate that distance students in this study were pleased with their overall enrolment experiences, in part, because online communication and interaction were considered as valuable components of the virtual learning process. Most respondents had positive experiences with and attitudes toward distance courses; however, there were diverse views that typically reflected different instructor styles and individual course organization. Students gave typical reasons for engaging in distance education, such as convenience, fit with lifestyle commitments, and the independence and flexibility provided. A majority of students indicated a preference for face-to-face learning over online learning, but students cited a number of advantages and disadvantages to both methods of delivery.

This research study provides a contextualized account of the factors that influence distance learner's choice of a postsecondary institution. Distance student migration is an emerging but hidden pattern in postsecondary transitions, one that has implications on a global scale and which will likely increase as students seek cost-effective and flexible means of pursuing education. Future research should explore further the experiences of "virtual migrants" and the factors surrounding students' decision-making process to enrol in distance courses outside of one's jurisdiction.

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## **Appendix A Maritime Student Distance Education Survey**

Please complete the entire survey and remember to click on the "Submit" button before exiting.

Please confirm your name to be entered into the draw for 1 of 3 chances to win a \$200 Future Shop gift card. Please complete the survey only ONCE.

Student Name:

1. What is the highest level of education completed by your father?

- Some high school or less
- High school diploma
- Some post-secondary education
- Community college certificate or diploma
- Bachelor's degree
- Graduate or professional degree
- Unknown

2. What is the highest level of education completed by your mother?

- Some high school or less
- High school diploma
- Some post-secondary education
- Community college certificate or diploma
- Bachelor's degree
- Graduate or professional degree
- Unknown

3. Do you have brothers or sisters currently attending a post-secondary institution?

- Yes
- No

4. Do you have brothers or sisters who have graduated from a post-secondary program (i.e., university, college or trades program)?

- Yes
- No

5. Do you have any brothers or sisters who also attended Memorial University?

- Yes
- No

6. Listed below are factors that students often consider when choosing a university. On a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being 'not important at all' and 5 being 'very important' please rate how important the following factors were to you in making your choice to study at Memorial University.

- |   |           |
|---|-----------|
| a. Total cost   | 1 2 3 4 5 |
| b. Availability of financial aid based on your need (e.g., student loans) | 1 2 3 4 5 |
| c. Availability of scholarships   | 1 2 3 4 5 |
| d. Distance of program/institution from your home                         | 1 2 3 4 5 |
| e. Distance from your friends or relatives                                | 1 2 3 4 5 |
| f. Availability of student housing (e.g., residence)                      | 1 2 3 4 5 |
| g. Availability of the program  | 1 2 3 4 5 |
| h. Preparation for graduate school (e.g., Master's degree)                | 1 2 3 4 5 |



- i. Memorial University's reputation 1 2 3 4 5
- j. Reputation of Newfoundland and Labrador 1 2 3 4 5

7. Which one of these factors was the MOST IMPORTANT influence on your decision to study at Memorial University? Select one response.

- Total cost
- Availability of financial aid based on your need (e.g., student loans)
- Availability of scholarships
- Distance of program/institution from your home
- Distance from your friends or relatives
- Availability of student housing (e.g., residence)
- Availability of the program
- Preparation for graduate school (e.g., Master's degree)
- Memorial University's reputation
- Reputation of Newfoundland and Labrador
- Other (please indicate):

8. On a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being 'very much encouraged' and 5 being 'very much discouraged', to what extent did the following people encourage or discourage you to attend Memorial University?

- a. Father/male guardian 1 2 3 4 5
- b. Mother/female guardian 1 2 3 4 5
- c. Sister(s) and/or brother(s) 1 2 3 4 5
- d. Teacher(s) 1 2 3 4 5
- e. School counselor(s) 1 2 3 4 5
- f. Friend(s) 1 2 3 4 5

9. Was Memorial University your first choice?

- Yes
- No, another institution in my home province was my first choice
- No, another institution elsewhere in the Maritimes (NS, NB, PEI) was my first choice
- No, another institution elsewhere in Canada was my first choice
- No, an institution outside of Canada was my first choice

10. On a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being 'not important at all' and 5 being 'very important' how important of a factor were tuition fees in your selection of Memorial University?

1 2 3 4 5

11. Which of the following is the MOST important source you use to finance your education: Yourself (includes savings and employment earnings)

- Spouse or partner
- Parents
- Other family members
- Scholarships, bursaries and/ or awards
- Student line of credit/ credit cards
- Government student loans
- Other (please indicate):

12. Which is the SECOND MOST important source you use?

- Yourself (includes savings and employment earnings)
- Spouse or partner
- Parents
- Other family members
- Scholarships, bursaries and/ or awards
- Student line of credit/ credit cards
- Government student loans
- Other (please indicate):

13. Which is the THIRD MOST important source?

- Yourself (includes savings and employment earnings)
- Spouse or partner
- Parents
- Other family members
- Scholarships, bursaries and/ or awards
- Student line of credit/ credit cards
- Government student loans
- Other (please indicate):

14. Are you currently the recipient of any scholarship, bursary or monetary award?

- Yes
- No

15. Which statement best describes your current accommodations?

- I live in the university residence
- I live in accommodations that I rent
- I live in accommodations that I or my parents own
- I live with relatives/friends and pay rent to them
- I live with relatives/friends and do NOT pay rent to them
- Other

16. What best describes your employment status?

- Employed, and NOT looking for more or different work
- Employed, but looking for more or different work
- Unemployed (i.e., looking for work)
- Not employed and NOT looking for work

17. How many jobs do you currently have?

Answer here:

18. Please select the option that best describes your work environment (if you hold more than one job, select all that apply).

- On-campus, related to your area of study
- On-campus, NOT related to your area of study
- Off-campus, related to your area of study
- Off-campus, NOT related to your area of study

19. At the time you applied to Memorial University, did you have any relatives residing in Newfoundland and Labrador?

- Yes
- No

20. At the time you applied to Memorial University, did you have any relatives attending the university?

- Yes
- No

21. At the time you applied to Memorial University, did you have any friends residing in Newfoundland and Labrador?

- Yes
- No

22. At the time you applied to Memorial University, did you have any friends attending or considering applying to the institution?

- Yes
- No

23. Have you attended any post-secondary institutions other than Memorial University?

- Yes
- No

24. Which best describes your average grade in high school?

- 40%
- 45%
- 50%
- 55%
- 60%
- 65%
- 70%
- 75%
- 80%
- 85%
- 90%
- Over 90%

25. The next series of questions asks about your experience at Memorial University. For each statement, please indicate whether you Strongly Disagree, Somewhat Disagree, Neither Agree nor Disagree, Somewhat Agree, or Strongly Agree.

a. The tuition fees I pay at Memorial University are reasonable.

- Strongly Disagree
- Somewhat Disagree
- Neither Agree nor Disagree
- Somewhat Agree
- Strongly Agree

b. Overall, I am satisfied with my experience at Memorial University.

- Strongly Disagree
- Somewhat Disagree
- Neither Agree nor Disagree
- Somewhat Agree
- Strongly Agree

c. I would recommend Memorial University to others.

- Strongly Disagree
- Somewhat Disagree
- Neither Agree nor Disagree
- Somewhat Agree
- Strongly Agree

d. Overall, I am satisfied with the services available to out-of -province students at Memorial University.

- Strongly Disagree
- Somewhat Disagree
- Neither Agree nor Disagree
- Somewhat Agree
- Strongly Agree

e. I plan to live in my home community after graduation.

- Strongly Disagree
  - Somewhat Disagree
  - Neither Agree nor Disagree
  - Somewhat Agree
  - Strongly Agree
- f. I would consider staying in Newfoundland and Labrador following graduation.
- Strongly Disagree
  - Somewhat Disagree
  - Neither Agree nor Disagree
  - Somewhat Agree
  - Strongly Agree
- g. I would be willing to re-locate to Newfoundland and Labrador for a job.
- Strongly Disagree
  - Somewhat Disagree
  - Neither Agree nor Disagree
  - Somewhat Agree
  - Strongly Agree

26. During the period of September 2010 to August 2011, how many months do you intend to live in Newfoundland?

Answer here:

27. Which of the following BEST describes what you plan to do upon completion of your current program:

- Enroll in another program at Memorial University
- Enroll in another program at a different institution in Atlantic Canada
- Enroll in another program at a different institution in Canada, but outside of Atlantic Canada
- Find employment in your home province
- Find employment in Newfoundland and Labrador
- Find employment in Atlantic Canada
- Find employment in Canada, outside of Atlantic Canada
- Find employment in another country outside of Canada
- Undecided

28. Have your distance education courses been on-line courses, correspondence courses, or both types?

- On-line (i.e., web-based format)
- Correspondence (i.e., paper-based format)
- Both

29. Why did you decide to take a distance education course (or courses)? Check all that apply.

- I was not living near the university campus.
- My work schedule conflicted with the on-campus section of the course.
- My class schedule conflicted with the on-campus section of the course.
- I prefer distance courses over on-campus courses.
- I had family responsibilities.
- There was no on-campus section of the course.
- It gave me more flexibility.
- It was more convenient.
- Other reasons (please specify)?

30. The next series of questions asks about your learning experiences in distance education courses. For each statement, please indicate whether you Strongly Disagree, Somewhat Disagree, Neither Agree nor Disagree, Somewhat Agree, or Strongly Agree.

I believe I can learn the same amount in either distance or on-campus courses.

- Strongly Disagree
- Somewhat Disagree
- Neither Agree nor Disagree
- Somewhat Agree
- Strongly Agree

I believe I can earn the same grade in distance and on-campus courses.

- Strongly Disagree
- Somewhat Disagree
- Neither Agree nor Disagree
- Somewhat Agree
- Strongly Agree

I enjoy studying by distance.

- Strongly Disagree
- Somewhat Disagree
- Neither Agree nor Disagree
- Somewhat Agree
- Strongly Agree

I would prefer distance education for courses I take in the future.

- Strongly Disagree
- Somewhat Disagree
- Neither Agree nor Disagree
- Somewhat Agree
- Strongly Agree

Overall, I am satisfied with distance education at Memorial University.

- Strongly Disagree
- Somewhat Disagree
- Neither Agree nor Disagree
- Somewhat Agree
- Strongly Agree

31. If you have any other comments, concerns, or feedback about studying at Memorial University, please note them in the space below:

32. Would you like to be entered into the draw for 1 of 3 chances to win a \$200 Future Shop gift card?

- Yes
- No

33. Would you be willing to participate in a follow-up interview?

- Yes
- No

Please confirm your student number (type in the space below):

Please click on the "Submit" button below before exiting

<http://channels.mun.ca/survey/entry.jsp?id=12855939783001> of 7 1/4/2011 1:16 PM6.

## **Appendix B Interview Script**

### Introduction

Hello, may I speak with (student name)?

I am calling from Memorial University. My name is (your name). We contacted you in the Fall Semester and you completed a survey about your experiences at Memorial University.

Are you still willing to help us by doing an interview over the phone?

This interview is intended to collect further information about your experiences at Memorial. Your participation in this interview is voluntary and your answers will be kept strictly confidential and used for research purposes only. You can decline to answer any questions that you do not know how to answer or do not want to answer.

That interview would be about 20 minutes. Everyone who participates will be entered into a draw to win a \$200 Future Shop™ gift card.

1. Can you please describe when you first considered attending Memorial University?

Possible Prompts:

How did you first learn about Memorial University?

What initially brought Memorial University to your attention as a university that you might attend?

When did you first consider attending Memorial University?

2. Were there any services or programs that you used to help you decide where to attend university?

Possible Prompts:

Were there any sources of information that you would say helped you decide which university to attend?

3. Were there other post-secondary options that you considered besides Memorial?

Possible Prompts:

Did you consider another university?

Did you consider another non-university institution?

4. Did you decide to study at a university outside of your home province BEFORE you decided to enroll at Memorial?

Possible Prompts:

Had you considered taking a program at a university outside of your home province prior to considering Memorial?

5. Did you have any reservations about attending Memorial University?

Possible Prompts:

Was there anything about Memorial that made you feel hesitant about going to the

university?

Did you have any significant concerns about attending Memorial University?

6. What factors influenced your decision to attend Memorial University?

Possible Prompts:

Were there academic factors that motivated or influenced you to choose Memorial?

Were there program factors that motivated or influenced you to choose Memorial?

Were there cost or financial factors that motivated or influenced you to choose Memorial?

7. What was the MOST IMPORTANT influence on your decision to attend Memorial?

Possible Prompts:

What factor MOST INFLUENCED your decision to attend Memorial?

What was the major factor that helped you choose Memorial University over other options you had?

8. Were there particular individual's who influenced your decision to attend Memorial?

Possible Prompts:

How did your family influence your decision to attend Memorial University?

How did your friends influence your decision to attend Memorial University?

How did your high school teachers and guidance counsellors influenced your decision to attend Memorial University?

Were there any individuals at Memorial University influenced your decision to attend the university?

9. Was the cost of tuition fees at Memorial University a consideration when you decided to go to the university?

Possible Prompts:

Did the cost of tuition fees at Memorial influence your decision to attend the university?

10. Would an increase in tuition fees or other university fees cause you to reconsider your enrollment at Memorial?

Possible Prompts:

How would an increase in tuition fees impact your continuing enrollment at Memorial?

How would you feel if the tuition fees increased at Memorial?

Do you think you would still be at Memorial if the tuition fees were higher?

11. What characteristics does your ideal university have?

Possible Prompts:

Think about your ideal university. What characteristics does it have?

How have these ideal characteristics influenced your decision to attend Memorial University?

What characteristics of an ideal university does Memorial have?

What characteristics of an ideal university are lacking at Memorial?

12. How do you intend to pay for your tuition and other costs associated with attending

Memorial University?

Possible Prompts:

Do your parents or guardians assist you in paying for your tuition or other costs?

Do other family members assist you in paying for your tuition or other costs?

13. Looking back on your decision to attend Memorial University, do you have any regrets or reservations or lingering questions?

Possible Prompts:

Do you believe you made the right decision in enrolling at Memorial or should you have done something differently?

Should you have attended a different university or another institution?

14. Are there any difficulties that you have experienced since enrolling at Memorial University?

15. Is there anything about attending Memorial that you didn't expect?

Possible Prompts:

What is the most surprising aspect of your university experience so far?

16. What are the next steps you will take in your program?

17. Why did you decide to take distance courses?

18. Did you have a choice between completing distance-delivered courses or face-to-face in the classroom at the university?

Possible Prompts:

Was your program available in the traditional face to face format?

Were face-to-face courses an option for you, or are there factors that prevent you from doing so?

19. Do you prefer courses that are delivered via distance or face-to-face? Please explain.

Possible Prompts:

Would you rather take courses via distance, or would you rather be face-to-face with your instructor?

20. Do you think that face-to-face classroom courses have advantages that distance courses do not? What are some of these advantages?

Possible Prompts:

What are some advantages to taking a course in a classroom setting rather than through distance?

What are some of these advantages?

21. Do you think that face-to-face classroom courses have disadvantages that distance courses do not?

Possible Prompts:

What are some disadvantages to taking a course in a classroom setting rather than through distance?



What are some of these disadvantages?

22. Do you think that distance courses have advantages that face-to-face classroom courses do not?

Possible Prompts:

Do you think that there are advantages to taking a course through distance rather than taking it in a classroom setting?

What are some of these advantages?

23. Do you think that distance courses have disadvantages that face-to-face classroom courses do not?

Possible Prompts:

Do you think that there are disadvantages to taking a course through distance rather than taking it in a classroom setting?

What are some of these disadvantages?

24. Are there any reasons why you didn't take additional distance courses?

25. What characteristics does an ideal university distance course have in your opinion?

Possible Prompts:

Think about your ideal distance course. What characteristics does it have?