

Help-seeking Strategies Used by High-Achieving and Low-Achieving Distance Education Students

**Margaret Taplin
Jessie C. K. Yum
Olugbemi Jegede,
Rocky Y.K. Fan,
May Sok-ching Chan
The Open University of Hong Kong,
Hong Kong SAR, China**

**Paper presented at the 13th Annual Conference of the Asian Association of Open Universities,
Beijing, 14th-17th October, 1999**

Introduction

Effective help-seeking is an important strategy that is fundamental to successful learning whenever the student's knowledge or comprehension is insufficient to enable independent resolution of a problem (Karabenick and Knapp, 1991; Newman and Schwager, 1995; Ryan and Hicks, 1997). Not only is it a strategy that can help students to address their immediate learning needs (Ryan and Hicks, 1997), it can also be a way of improving their performance (Karabenick and Knapp, 1991). Research has indicated that there are certain types of students who are able to appreciate the benefits of help-seeking as a strategy to promote their learning. Ryan and Hicks (1997) reported that students whose goals are to gain understanding, insight and skill, and whose self-worth is measured by their mastery of these, are likely to view help-seeking as a positive strategy. They further reported that some groups of students might seek help for reasons other than to support their learning. For example, those whose goals are concerned with positive peer relationships might view help-seeking as an instrument to achieving this end.

The issue of gender differences in help-seeking has been considered by several writers, although no clear consensus has been reached. For example, Ryan and Hicks (1997) reported evidence to suggest that females are more likely than males to seek help, although other studies have reported no such gender differences (Newman, 1990, Ryan and Pintrich, 1997).

Nevertheless, help-seeking is often regarded with negative connotations. Karabenick and Knapp (1991) found that many students were able to report times when they could have used assistance with courses, but did not seek the help that probably would have enabled them to surmount their difficulties. Some students, particularly those who have a high desire to be judged as successful and able, may construe help-seeking as admitting to lack of ability and thus consider it to be threatening to their self-worth, and hence to be avoided (Ryan and Hicks, 1997). Ryan and Hicks found that those students who are particularly likely to feel threatened are those who 'define success and self-worth as outperforming others but who perform lower than most other students' (p.154). Consequently, they will often employ ineffective strategies such as giving up prematurely, waiting passively for somebody to offer an explanation, or persisting unsuccessfully on their own. It is therefore important for students to be aware of ways in which help-seeking can be employed as a positive learning strategy.

In order to encourage the development of effective help-seeking, it is important to have an understanding of circumstances in which it can be perceived as threatening and those in which it can be perceived as valuable. For example, Daubman and Lehman (1993) found that students are more likely to seek help if their need for help can be attributed to external factors or lack of effort, rather than to, for example, lack of ability.

Considerable research has been done about the effectiveness of different types of help-seeking. Two particular types have been described: executive and instrumental (Karabenick and Knapp, 1991). Executive help-seeking, which places the responsibility on the help-giver, for example by asking for the answer, reduces the time and effort required to complete a task. Instrumental help-seeking, which places the responsibility on the seeker, for example by asking for a hint or an explanation of the principles leading to the problem's solution, allows for greater independence in completing the task. Newman and Schwager (1995) further categorise these into requests for process-related information (hints or requests designed to figure out a rule or carry out an operation), explanations, clarification of information or answers, confirmation of uncertain answers, requests for the final confirmation of an answer or the correct answer, or requests for non task-related information.

Even amongst those students who are prepared to seek help, it is possible that their help-seeking can be counterproductive to their learning, for example if they immediately ask for help before attempting, or ask for an answer and then give up (Newman and Schwager, 1995). Consequently, as Newman and Schwager claim, it is important to encourage students to differentiate between help that will encourage their dependence on the help-giver, and help that will facilitate mastery and long-term autonomy.

For distance education students, help-seeking takes place in a different context than for students in conventional education. This is characterised by limited face-to-face contact, little interaction between students and, often, isolated learning. Consequently, if distance educators are to help students to make the most effective use of help-seeking strategies, it is first important to understand the nature of help-seeking amongst these students. This paper will describe a study that compared the help-seeking strategies used by students identified as high achievers in courses at the Open University of Hong Kong (OUHK) and groups identified as low achievers, in an attempt to uncover any insights about successful help-seeking strategies that can be used by distance education students, specifically those in the predominantly Chinese culture of Hong Kong.

The study sought to investigate whether either the high-achieving or low-achieving group of students is more likely than the other to seek help, the kinds of problems for which they seek it, and from whom they seek it. A further question was whether either group was more likely than the other to engage in instrumental or executive help-seeking. For both groups of students, specific research questions, with respect to high and low-achieving students were:

1. Is either group more likely than the other to seek help either directly by asking somebody else, or by forming study groups with other student/s?
2. To what extent, and under what circumstances, is help-seeking perceived by high or low achievers to be valuable or threatening?
3. About what sorts of things do they seek help and from whom to they seek it?
4. What are their reasons for not seeking help?
5. Do those who seek help do so effectively?

6. Do those who do not seek help have appropriate alternative ways of overcoming their difficulties?

These questions were also considered with respect to the independent variable gender. This was considered because gender, along with educational background and previous distance education experience, has been identified as a major factor affecting students' performance (Fan and Chan 1997), and is one of the major independent variables considered in the overall project (please refer to CRIDAL, 1999, for discussions of the other two).

Methodology

Data were collected by questionnaires completed by 712 students, and telephone interviews with a sub-sample of 32. Table 1 shows the number of respondents by achievement and gender.

Table 1: Number of subjects completing questionnaire, by achievement and gender

	Male	Female	Total
High Achievers	197	263	460
Low Achievers	146	106	252
Total	343	369	712

The sample was selected from students ranked in the top 5 per cent (high achievers) and bottom 5 per cent (low achievers) of OUHK courses over four semesters from August 1996 to February 1998. Full details about the methodology, questionnaire and interview schedule have been reported by Chan et al. (1999). This paper will focus just on describing the items that were designed to investigate students' help-seeking behaviours.

Items to Investigate Help-Seeking Behaviours

It was considered important to investigate the students' help-seeking behaviours in relation to the full spectrum of their student lives. Consequently, the items constructed for this part of the questionnaire were based on the work of Grayson, Clarke and Miller (1995), who included financial, course-related, domestic, inter-personal and personal crises, and managing resources and facilities.

One series of questionnaire items (Figure 1) was designed to investigate patterns in the formation of study groups with other students.

Figure 1: Questionnaire items used to investigate whether students formed self-study groups

- I preferred to study with other students rather than to study individually [rated on a 5-point scale, where 'always'=5 and 'never'=1]
- I formed or joined a self-study group other than organised tutorials [yes/no]
- [if 'yes'] The usual number of people in my self-study group (not counting official tutorials) was [2, 3-5, 6-10, more than 10]
- My self-study group usually communicated: [by e-mail, by telephone, by fax, in face-to-face meetings]

The statement 'I believe that help-seeking is a good way to learn and grow' was used as an indicator of the extent to which the students regarded help-seeking as a useful strategy. This item was rated on a 5-point scale, where 5 represented 'strongly agree' and 1

represented ‘strongly disagree’. A further set of questions (Figure 2), also requiring the students to give the same ratings, sought to gain some information about the kind of help they preferred to seek.

Figure 2: Questionnaire items used to investigate students’ preferred help-seeking styles

- If I sought help, I preferred to ask the other person to tell me the answer.
- If I sought help, I preferred to just ask for enough help to enable me to solve the problem by myself
- If I sought help, I preferred the other person to demonstrate the procedure so I could copy it to get the answer myself.

The other questionnaire item related to help-seeking (Appendix 1) was designed to explore what sorts of things the students sought help about and from whom they sought it. They were given a list of problems/difficulties that included new study materials, volume of materials to study, integration of studying and other duties, writing skills (in the language used in the course), self-motivation, anxiety about tests and examinations, finding time to study, and conflicts about spending time with family, friends or colleagues. For each of these areas they were asked to indicate whether they sought help or not and, if so, whether it was from the course co-ordinator, tutor, a work colleague, another student in the course, a friend or family member, or somebody who had done the course before.

The interview questions shown in Appendix 2 were designed to draw out more information about why students sought help, and particularly the nature of the help they sought.

Results

Help-seeking as a Valuable Learning Tool

Table 2 shows the mean ratings on the item regarding help-seeking as a valuable way to learn. There were no significant differences in means of the high and low achievers, with both groups rating it between 3 (occasionally) and 4 (often) as a good way to learn.

Table 2: Rating of help-seeking as a valuable learning tool (by achievement).

Item	N	Mean Score	S.D.	df	t
regarded help-seeking as a good way to learn	454 250	3.73 3.64	1.00 0.96	702	1.228

Figures in bold represent high achievers.

In the interview, the most common opinion was that help seeking is a good way to learn only if it comes after having attempted the task to the best of one’s ability (6 high achievers and 8 low achievers). One high achiever and two low achievers said they had tried asking for help but had given up - the former because he was embarrassed that he still did not understand, and the latter because the helper was too busy. Another high achiever said it is important that the helper does not look down on the help seeker, because that can have an adverse psychological effect. Four high achievers and 2 low achievers said they would have liked to ask for help but did not because it was ‘too troublesome’ to make contact with the tutor or find somebody else with the necessary knowledge or expertise.

Gender Effects

Table 3 shows the results of two-way analysis of variance, which indicate that there were no significant differences between the mean ratings of gender and achievement groups.

Table 3: Rating of help-seeking as a valuable learning tool (by achievement and gender).

Item	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F
regarded help-seeking as a good way to learn	1.510	2	0.755	0.778

Formation of Self-Study Groups

One of the criteria included to measure students' help-seeking habits was whether or not they formed voluntary study groups other than in formal tutorials (Table 4).

Table 4: Number of students who formed self-study groups

	High Achievers	Low Achievers	χ^2
Formed self-study groups: Yes	59 397	29 221	0.27
Number of people in self-formed study groups: 2 3-5 6-10	11 39 9	8 23 1	3.28
Mode of communication by study group: e-mail telephone fax face-to-face	7 44 14 47	2 20 4 23	-

Chi-square tests suggested that there was no statistically significant relationship between achievement and the formation of self-study groups ($\chi^2=0.27$). Similarly, there were no significant relationships between achievement and the number of students in groups ($\chi^2=3.28$). It can be seen, however, that in both the high achievers and the low achievers groups, the majority of students said that they worked alone rather than forming groups. In the follow-up interview, the reasons given equally by both groups for this included that they could not make time to work with a group (7 high achievers and 7 low achievers) and that they were afraid they would get distracted and chat instead of working (1 high achiever and 2 low achievers). Six of the high achievers also expressed concern that if they worked in a group they might have to slow their pace to that of the slowest member, although no low achievers gave this as a reason. Five high achievers and 2 low achievers said they did not need to study in a group. Five high achievers and 10 low achievers said they would have preferred to study in a group if it had been easier to organise. The 7 high achievers and 3 low achievers who said working in a group had helped them attributed this to being able to pool ideas and divide tasks. Where groups were formed, the most common size was 3 to 5 students.

For the mode of communication used by groups, students were permitted to tick as many boxes as were appropriate. It is interesting to note that in both high-achieving and low-achieving categories the most common mode of communication was face-to-face, followed closely by telephone, but that little use was made of e-mail.

Gender Effects

Table 5 shows the breakdown of frequency of responses to the questions about self-study groups, by gender. There was a significant relationship between gender and achievement in the formation of self-study groups ($\chi^2=9.28$, $p<0.01$), with the largest proportion being the high-achieving females (16%) and the smallest the low-achieving females and high-achieving males (both 9%). Chi-square tests were not calculated for group sizes because of the small expected frequencies in some cells, but again it can be seen that the most common group size for all categories was 3-5. For the mode of communication by study groups, 81 per cent of the high-achieving females who joined groups met face-to-face, as did 80 per cent of the low-achieving females, compared to 78 percent for both the high-achieving and low-achieving male groups.

Table 5: Number of students who formed self-study groups (by achievement and gender)

	Male High Achievers	Male Low Achievers	Female High Achievers	Female Low Achievers	χ^2
Formed self-study groups:	18	18	42	10	6.47*
Number of people in self-formed study groups:					
2	3	6	8	2	
3-5	13	12	27	8	-
>6	2	1	7	0	
Mode of communication by study group:					
e-mail	3	2	4	0	-
telephone	14	12	31	7	
fax	6	2	8	2	
face-to-face	14	14	34	8	

*significant, $p<0.05$

Seeking Help for Various Kinds of Problems

It has been reported elsewhere (Fan et al., 1999) that the students indicated the problems most likely to have caused difficulties with their work were finding time to study, integrating study with their other commitments, the volume of course materials, and test and examination anxiety. Table 6 shows the numbers of students in the high-achievers and low-achievers groups who said they sought help for these and other problems. Chi-square tests suggest that there are no statistically significant relationships between help-seeking and achievement. In both high-achieving and low-achieving groups the largest numbers of students said they had sought help for problems related to new study materials (77 per cent and 73 per cent respectively), followed by test and examination anxiety (54 per cent and 50 per cent). Similar numbers said that they sought help for problems relating to volume of materials (46 per cent and 48 per cent) and integration of their studies with their other duties and responsibilities (46 per cent and 48 percent). In the high achievers group the next three were spending time with family, friends and colleagues (43 per cent),

writing skills (42 per cent) and self-motivation (38 per cent), while the order for the low achievers was writing skills (42 per cent), then self-motivation (37 per cent). Finding time to study was the problem about which the least number of students in either group sought help (30 per cent and 26 per cent).

Table 6: Help-seeking for various problems (by achievement level)

Difficulties with:	High Achievers		Low Achievers		χ^2
	Sought Help	Did Not Seek Help	Sought Help	Did Not Seek Help	
New study materials	355	105	187	68	1.31
Volume of materials	218	235	116	131	0.09
Integration of studying and other duties	207	241	119	129	0.20
Writing skills in the language of the course	183	254	102	143	0.00
Self-motivation	171	281	94	155	0.00
Anxiety about tests and examinations	242	210	129	127	0.65
Finding time to study	134	312	64	183	1.33
Spending time with family, friends or colleagues	192	251	91	152	2.24

Gender Effects

Table 7 shows the numbers of students in each group who said they had sought help for the given problems.

Table 7: Students who sought help (by achievement and gender)

Difficulties with:	High Achievers		Low Achievers		χ^2
	Male	Female	Male	Female	
New study materials	141	204	101	79	11.06**
Volume of materials	85	126	63	53	5.94*
Integration of studying and other duties	78	125	64	54	7.56**
Writing skills in the language of the course	70	121	55	49	7.27**
Self-motivation	54	111	53	36	17.06**
Anxiety about tests and examinations	84	150	69	51	15.08**
Finding time to study	49	84	39	23	11.59**
Spending time with family, friends or colleagues	72	121	52	38	10.45**

*Significant, $p < 0.05$

**Significant, $p < 0.01$

Chi-square tests indicated significant relationships between gender and achievement for seeking help for all 8 types of problems: new study materials ($\chi^2=11.06$, $p < 0.01$), volume of materials ($\chi^2=5.94$, $p < 0.05$), integration of study with other duties ($\chi^2=7.56$, $p < 0.01$), writing skills in the language of the course ($\chi^2=7.27$, $p < 0.01$), self-motivation ($\chi^2=17.06$, $p < 0.01$), anxiety about tests and examinations ($\chi^2=15.08$, $p < 0.01$), finding time to study

($\chi^2=11.59$, $p<0.01$), and finding time to spend with family, friends and colleagues ($\chi^2=10.45$, $p<0.01$). The high-achieving females had the highest proportions for seeking help with new study materials (78 per cent), writing skills (46 per cent, the same as low-achieving females), self-motivation (57 per cent), test and examination anxiety (57 per cent), finding time to study (32 per cent) and finding time for family and friends (46 per cent). The low-achieving females were the next most represented group on all of these except for two problems on which there were slightly more low-achieving males (36 and 34 per cent respectively) and finding time to study (27 and 22 per cent respectively) and finding time to spend with family and friends (36-37 per cent of all three groups). The low-achieving females had the highest representations in seeking help for volume of work (50 per cent) and integration of duties (51 per cent), with the high-achieving females the second highest (48 per cent on both problems). The differences between these two groups were the largest on test and examination anxiety (57 per cent of high-achieving females and 48 per cent of low-achieving females), self-motivation (42 per cent and 34 per cent respectively), and finding time to study (32 percent and 22 per cent). The high-achieving male group had the fewest students seeking help for volume of materials (43 per cent, the same as the low-achieving males), integration of duties (40 per cent), writing skills (36 per cent), self-motivation (27 per cent) and anxiety about tests and examinations (43 per cent). The four problems on which the highest proportions of students sought help were the same for all categories: new study materials. Volume of work, test and examination anxiety, and integration of duties. Finding time to study was commonly the problem for which the fewest in each category sought help

Different Types of Help Sought

Table 8 shows the mean ratings, by achievement, for the three given ways of seeking help. There were no significant differences between the mean ratings of high and low achievers of their preference for seeking any of the three suggested kinds of help. It can be seen that the highest mean rating was given to 'asking for just enough help to be able to solve the problem alone'. This is a type of instrumental, process-related help-seeking that places at least some of the responsibility on the seeker. The other two options, both of which are executive help-seeking that places the responsibility on the helper, were rated as being used less frequently.

Table 8: Students preferred ways of seeking help (by achievement)

Item	N	Mean Score	S.D.	df	t
preferred to ask the other person to tell the answer	449 249	2.59 2.61	1.04 1.09	696	0.216
preferred to ask for just enough help to solve the problem alone	452 248	3.66 3.63	0.94 0.95	698	0.351
preferred to ask for a demonstration to copy	450 249	2.28 2.34	1.07 1.13	697	0.761

Figures in bold represent high achievers

In the interview, the students were asked to give specific examples of the kind of help they sought. Only 4 students (2 high achievers and 2 low achievers) gave examples of instrumental help seeking, for example to check whether what they had done was correct or not. Sixteen examples (6 from high achievers and 10 from low achievers) were given

of executive help seeking, for example ‘guidelines about what to do’, or ‘explanation of what the questions were asking’. Four high achievers and 6 low achievers said the help they received was usually useful. Six high achievers and 4 low achievers said it was not, mainly because their help-givers (usually tutors) were too busy and in some cases too impatient or not well-enough informed, to give the detail they needed. One high achiever mentioned that she had sought help in the form of asking others to take over some of her other tasks to allow her to cope better with her studying.

Gender Effects

Two-way analysis of variance performed on the mean ratings for the different types of help seeking for achievement and gender groups (Table 9) indicated that there were no significant differences.

Table 9: Students preferred ways of seeking help (by achievement and gender)

Item	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F
preferred to ask the other person to tell the answer	6.079	2	3.040	2.741
preferred to ask for just enough help to solve the problem alone	1.412	2	0.706	0.790
preferred to ask for a demonstration to copy	1.600	2	0.800	0.668

From Whom Help Was Sought

Graphs (Appendix 3) were used to compare the sources from which help was sought by high and low achievers for the eight types of problems. It can be seen that the patterns are similar for the two groups. For course-related problems that required specialised help, such as new study materials and volume of materials, the majority in both groups asked their tutors for help, followed by other students and then former students of the course. It can be noted that slightly more low achievers sought help from former students. For problems with writing skills required to do the course work, however, the majority in both groups asked friends or family for assistance, with slightly more high achievers than low achievers seeking help from this source.

For organisational problems, such as integration of studying with other duties and responsibilities, and finding time to study, the majority in both high-achieving and low-achieving groups sought help from family or friends. For problems with integration of duties, the tutors were the next most sought-after helpers, although they did not feature prominently with either group for help with finding time to study. Other students and colleagues were also approached for help for organisational problems.

For personal problems, including self-motivation, test and examination anxiety, and finding time to spend with family, friends and colleagues, friends and family and fellow students were clearly the most frequently approached for help. University personnel, such as tutors, played a much less significant role in this kind of problem - although the tutors were

approached by 17-18 per cent of help-seekers for problems relating to test and examination anxiety.

The question of preferred sources of help was followed up in the interview, but there were no consistent patterns in the responses. One high achiever and 5 low achievers said that they would prefer to ask the tutor for help but that the tutors were usually so busy and so much in demand that it was not easy to receive the quality and quantity of help that they required.

Gender Effects

When the graphs shown in Appendix 3 were broken down by gender (Appendix 4), some further patterns were indicated. The highest percentages of the high-achieving female group sought help from family or friends for all problems except new course materials, for which the majority asked the tutor. Next, they tended to ask fellow students, except for help with writing skills (tutor) and integrating duties (similar percentages asked fellow students and tutor). The largest proportions of the low-achieving females also sought help from family or friends except for new course materials and writing skills (tutor). Again, the second-largest proportions asked fellow students. The largest percentage of the high-achieving males asked the tutor for help with new course materials, volume of materials and writing skills, family or friends for help with self-motivation and finding time to spend with others, and other students about test and examination anxiety. Equal numbers asked tutors and family/friends for help with integrating duties. The largest numbers of low-achieving males asked the tutor for help with new course materials, volume of materials, integration of duties (with the same number asking a friend), and writing skills, family/friends about motivation, and fellow students about test and examination anxiety. In all cases, the high-achieving female group had the highest percentage of students asking family/friends followed, in most cases, by the low-achieving females. For all problems, there were also higher percentages of high-achieving females than other groups seeking help from fellow students. For seeking help from other sources, there were no clear patterns, with the percentages varying from problem to problem.

Summary and Discussion

The purpose of this paper was to report aspects of the help-seeking behaviours of high achieving and low achieving students at OUHK. There was no evidence of statistically significant differences between high and low achievers, but some interesting patterns have suggested some implications for further research or policy implementation. The majority of students regarded help-seeking as a good way to learn. Interviews suggested, however, that they thought they should try to do it themselves first. Main reasons for not seeking help, apart from not needing it, were that access to a tutor or suitable knowledgeable person was difficult. One implication suggested by these outcomes is the need to explore strategies that will make it less troublesome for students to seek help when it is needed.

The majority of students indicated that they did not seek help for any problems other than those associated directly with their study materials. While there were similarities between the two achievement groups in help-seeking for academic difficulties, there was a tendency for more of the high achieving students to seek help for personal difficulties relating to their courses. While personal problems such as finding time to study were rated highly as affecting course results, there were comparatively low proportions of students actually

seeking help for these problems. There was a tendency for more females to seek help for all types of problems, and usually for more of the high-achieving females to do so than the low-achieving females. The biggest differences between the numbers of high-achieving and low-achieving women seeking help were for test and examination anxiety, self-motivation, and finding time to study. The question of whether seeking help for these problems is one of the things that has given the high-achieving women the 'edge' over the low achievers warrants further investigation. Where similar numbers of high and low-achieving women sought help for the other problems, there is the implication that the former may be doing something different that enables them to either receive more effective help or to utilise it more effectively. The data about preferred kinds of help sought do not give any support to this conjecture, but this is also worthy of further investigation. Another interesting observation is that, for most of the problems considered in this study, the group in which the fewest students sought help was the high-achieving men. This suggests that they either did not need help, or found other methods of solving their problems that were clearly not too detrimental to their achievement.

Except for problems directly related to coursework, on which the majority sought help from tutors, the majority of students asked family or friends for help, with fellow students being another popular source. In the interviews a number of students mentioned the difficulties they had with trying to obtain help from tutors who are frequently too busy to be able to give useful help, or not available at the times most convenient for those particular students. This may be a reason why many students turned to family and friends for help. It is interesting to speculate whether the high achievers are in fact receiving help from family or friends who have better knowledge or expertise and are therefore able to help them more effectively than the family/friends helping the low achievers. Further investigation of this question could reveal some useful insights about the quality of help received by high and low-achievers.

A number of help-seeking strategies was identified, which included the establishment of self-formed study groups. While the questionnaire data revealed that the majority of students in both the high achieving and low achieving groups reported that they preferred to work alone, the follow-up interviews indicated that a number of students, particularly low achievers, would like to work with groups if it were easier to organise. One way in which this organisation could be facilitated is through the use of e-mail. It was noted that very few of the respondents to this study reported the use of e-mail to discuss with fellow students, so it may be worthwhile to explore further how the use of this medium can be enhanced. A significant relationship was found in the questionnaire analysis between gender and achievement in the formation of self-study groups, with the largest proportion being the high-achieving females and the smallest the low-achieving females. This suggests that it may be worthwhile to conduct further research to investigate the potential impact of participating in study groups on the achievement, particularly, of low-achieving female students

In both groups, the students reported a preference for receiving a type of instrumental help, in which the help-giver provided enough of a hint for the student to solve the problem, although the majority of examples given in the interviews were in fact executive help-seeking, in which the helper tells the answer or does a demonstration. The interviews indicated that the help given was sometimes useful and sometimes not, and one of the main reasons given was that the helper was unable to provide adequate assistance that took into account the learner's level of understanding and needs. This suggests that some

tutor training in appropriate help-giving might help to enhance the quality of students' learning.

Although this project did not reveal many statistically significant differences between the help-seeking behaviours of high and low-achieving OUHK students, it is anticipated that further investigation of the issues outlined above will help to enhance the quality of the distance education experience for both high and low-achieving students.

References

- Chan, M.S.C., Jegede, O., Fan, R., Taplin, M. & Yum, J.C.K. (1999). 'A comparison of the study habits and preferences of high achieving and low achieving Open University students'. Paper presented at the 13th Annual Conference of the Asian Association of Open Universities, Beijing, 14th-17th October.
- Daubman, K. & Lehman, T. (1993). 'The effects of receiving help: gender differences in motivation and performance'. Sex Roles, 28 (11/12). pp.693-707.
- Fan, R., Taplin, M., Chan, M.S.C., Yum, J.C.K. & Jegede, O (1999). 'Effective support services - a target-oriented approach'. Paper presented at the 13th Annual Conference of the Asian Association of Open Universities, Beijing, 14th-17th October.
- Grayson, A., Clarke, D. & Miller, H. (1995). 'Students' everyday problems: a systematic qualitative analysis'. Counselling. August. 197-202.
- Karabenick, S. & Knapp, J. (1991). 'Relationship of academic help seeking to the use of learning strategies and other instrumental achievement behaviour in college students'. Journal of Educational Psychology. 83 (2), pp.221-230.
- Newman, R. (1990). 'Children's help-seeking in the classroom: the role of motivational factors and attitudes'. Journal of Educational Psychology, 82, 71-80.
- Newman, R. & Schwager, M. (1995). 'Students' help-seeking during problem solving: effects of grade, goal and prior achievement'. American Educational Research Journal. 32 (2), pp.352-376.
- Ryan, A. & Hicks, L. (1997). 'Social goals, academic goals, and avoiding seeking help in the classroom'. Journal of Early Adolescence. 17, 2, pp.152-181.
- Ryan, A. & Pintrich, P. (1997). "'Should I ask for help?'" The role of motivation and attitudes in adolescents' help-seeking in math class'. Journal of Educational Psychology, 89, 1-13.

Acknowledgement

This project on which this paper is based was funded by the President's Advisory Committee on Research and Development, The Open University of Hong Kong.

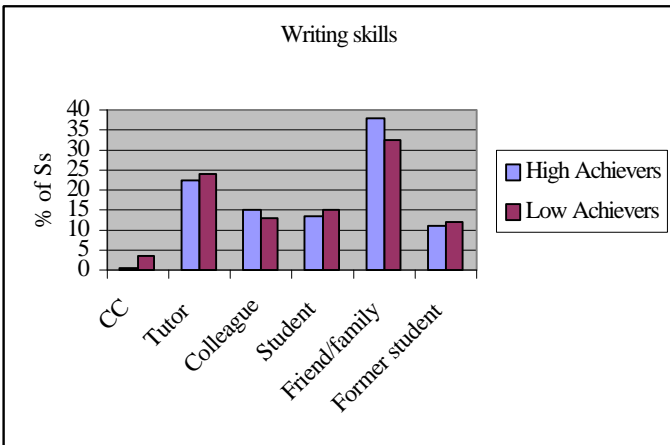
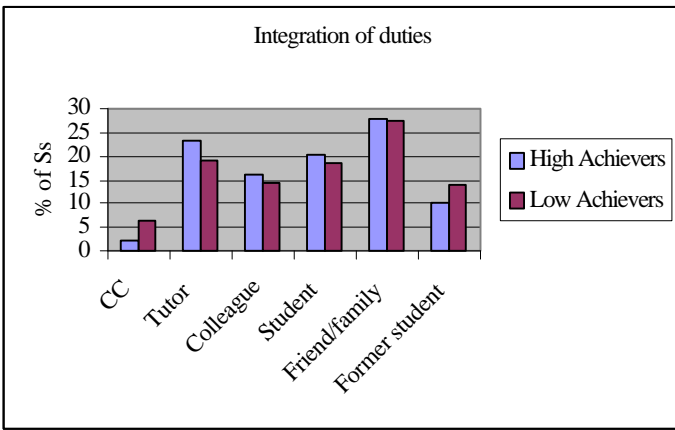
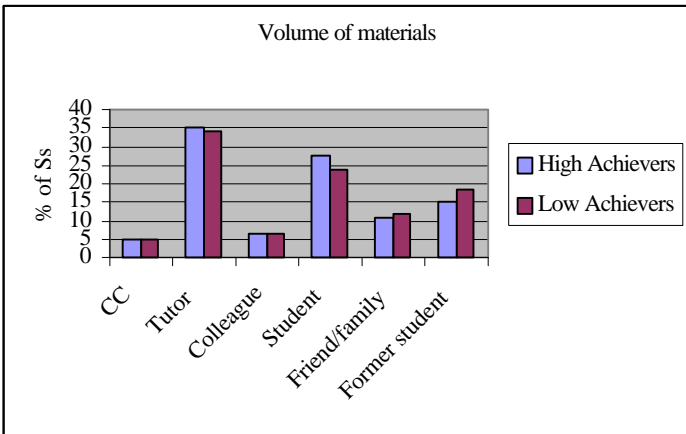
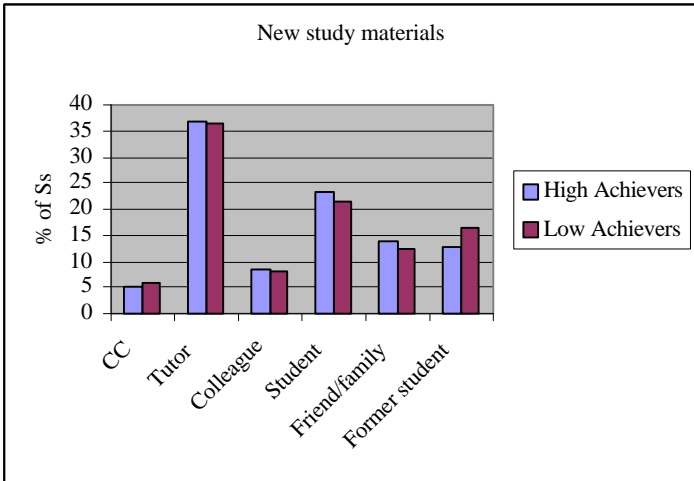
Appendix 1: Questionnaire item to identify patterns in students' help-seeking

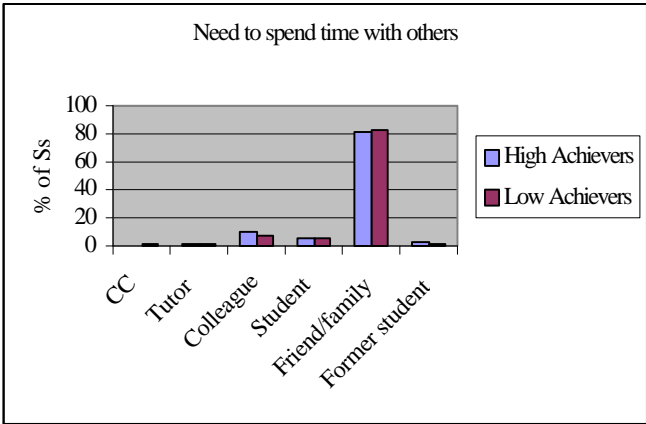
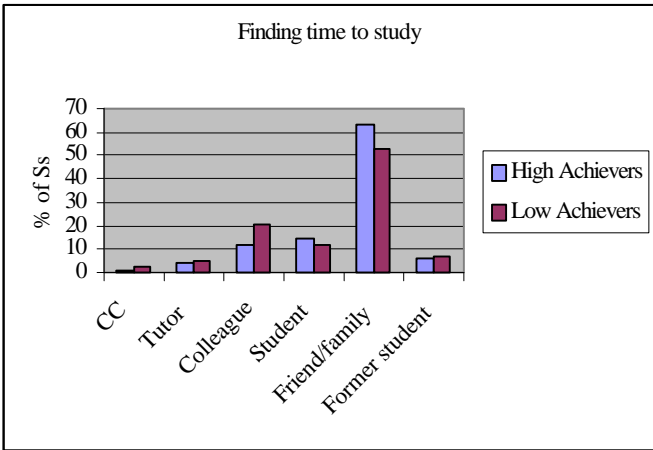
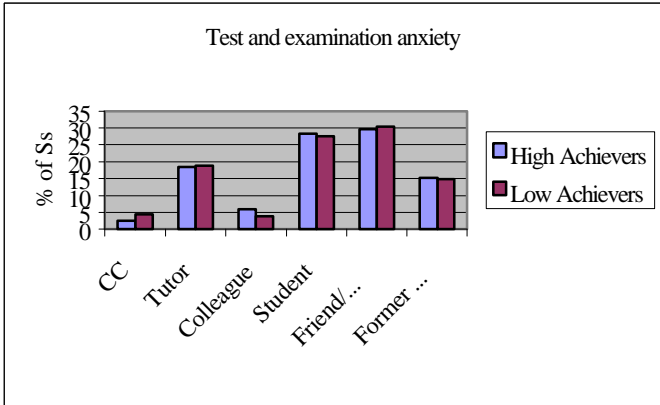
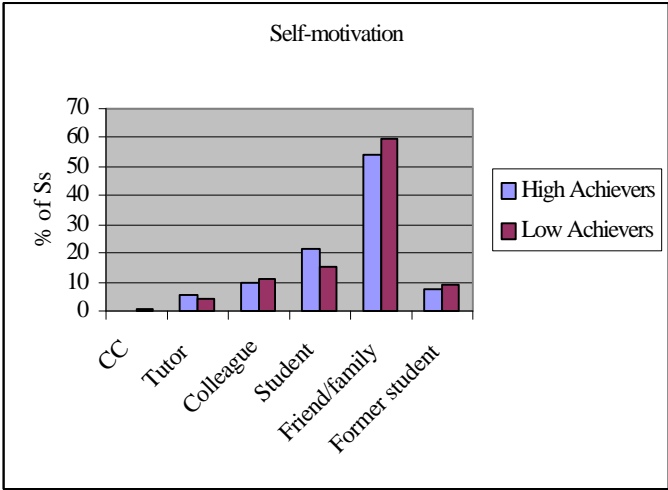
If I had any difficulties with the following I usually sought help from... (Please tick as many boxes as you need to.)	Course co-ordinator	Tutor	Work Colleague	Another student in the course	A friend or family member	Somebody who has done the course before	I do not ask anybody for help	Other (please specify)
a) new study materials								
b) volume of materials to study								
c) integration of studying and other duties								
d) my writing skills (in the language used in the course)								
e) motivating myself								
f) anxiety about tests and exams								
g) finding time to study								
h) spending time with my family, friends or colleagues								

Appendix 2: Interview questions related to help-seeking behaviour

- You said that in this course you mostly studied [alone/with other students]. What were your main reasons for preferring to study in this way?
How do you think working alone affected your result for this course?
OR How was the group formed? How many times did the group meet and at what stage/s of the course? In what way/s do you think that being a part of a group helped you in this course? Were there any difficulties about studying with other students that might have affected your results?
- What kinds of problems/difficulties affected you the most on this particular course? What were the main causes of these problems?
- Some people believe that asking for help is a good way to learn, while some think that it is cheating or that it means they have failed or will lose face. What is your opinion about this?
- [for those who said they asked for help for an academic or personal problem related to the course] What help did you ask them to give you? Did the help they gave meet your needs? Was the person whom you asked the most suitable person to give you the help, or would you have preferred to ask somebody else?
- [For those who did not seek help] Did you find a way to solve the problem? How?

Appendix 3: Percentage of help-seekers by source from which help was sought (by achievement)





Appendix 4: Percentage of help-seekers by source from which help was sought (achievement and gender)

