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**MOTIVATION TO LEARN IN ONLINE
ENVIRONMENTS: AN EXPLORATION OF TWO
TERTIARY EDUCATION CONTEXTS**

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy in Education

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ABSTRACT

Research evidence suggests that motivation is an important consideration for online learners. Notably, existing research has frequently focused on the design of motivating online learning environments. Alternatively, motivation has been viewed as a collection of relatively stable personal characteristics of learners. In contrast, a contemporary view that acknowledges the complexity and dynamic interplay of factors underlying and influencing motivation to learn (e.g., Turner & Patrick, 2008) is adopted here. From this 'person in context' perspective, this study investigates the nature of motivation to learn in online distance learning environments. The study explores how student motivation relates to online participation in these contexts. In addition, social and contextual factors that foster and undermine motivation are identified.

The research design utilises a case study approach which focuses on learners in two separate online distance courses within the same university programme. The boundary for each case study is defined by one piece of assessed work and the associated activities within each course. Interview and questionnaire data, supported by archived online data and course resources, were collected. Analysis of the data were made using the three conceptual lenses of self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985) and the continuum of human motivation encompassed within this theoretical framework.

Findings indicate that the motivation of learners in online environments was multidimensional. Intrinsic motivation and various types of extrinsic motivation were shown to co-exist. Complex relationships were also shown to exist between motivation and participation that were sensitive to situational influences. Multiple factors fostered the expression of high quality (i.e. more self-determined) motivation. Most prominent among these were the relevance of the learning activity, the provision of clear guidelines, and ongoing support and feedback from the teacher that was responsive to learners' needs. Supportive caring relationships were also important. A range of factors also undermined the motivation of learners; most notably high workload, assessment pressure, and the perception that the learning activity lacked relevance.

Student motivation to learn within these contexts was found to be multifaceted, complex and sensitive to situational factors. The use of self-determination theory has confirmed it as a useful analytic tool for exploring the complexity of motivation in online contexts. Implications based on the findings are considered for stakeholders.

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