Opportunity through online learning

Improving access, participation and success in higher education

Findings from 2017 Final Report (2016 NCSEHE Equity Fellowship)

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Background to the project

▪ One of three Equity Fellowships offered for 2016 by the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education (NCSEHE) Curtin University; which aimed to:

- Investigate engagement, teaching and support strategies for domestic u/g online students in Australia and at Open University UK
- Seek combined wisdom of higher education practitioners on what is most important to help students stay & succeed

National Guidelines for improving student outcomes in online learning
Why look at online learning?

- Online learning has a critical and growing place in widening access and participation in higher education for diverse student cohorts
- Students from backgrounds historically under-represented at university are more strongly represented in external/online studies, particularly in undergrad and enabling/pathways programs (mature-age, part-time, low SES, regional/remote, Indigenous & students with disability)
- Number of external students rising faster than that of internal students (DET 2017 discussion paper on student retention)
Growth in online learning

Percentage of external students within whole commencing domestic cohorts 2010-2016

Total numbers - 6.1% growth in external enrolments of commencing domestic students 2015-2016
Impact of *opportunity*

Online can provide the opportunity to study, for students who would not otherwise consider it possible.

➢ There’s never the *opportunity* and, you know, when I was single and I had a mortgage there was no way I could have done anything else; I was barely keeping my head above water then, you know, so *opportunity* plays a big part. *(Hailey, 41)*

➢ A great *opportunity* and I’m really enjoying it. *(Holly, 43)*

*(Quotes from: Stone et al. 2016)*
Opportunity to start… but how much opportunity to persist and succeed?

- Online student cohort has a poorer rate of completion of u/g degrees compared with on-campus students

- 46.6% external students completing compared with 76.6% for internal students (DET, 2017 - Completion Rates of Higher Education Students - Cohort Analysis, 2005-2014)

- External students 2.5 times more likely than internal students to withdraw without a qualification (Australian HE Standards Panel (HESP) Discussion Paper, 2017)
How can we improve opportunities?

▪ How to widen access **AND** help more online students persist and succeed?

▪ Interviews with 151 staff, across 16 higher education institutions – 15 in Australia + OU (UK)

▪ Academic, professional, managerial staff responsible for development, coordination and/or delivery of:
  • **Online education (primarily undergraduate); and/or**
  • **Support, success and retention strategies for online students**

▪ 75 professional staff – student support, retention, engagement, success; learning/academic skills; equity & diversity; disability services; careers; library; learning design; training & development; planning & data services
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Qualitative interviews

- What interventions/strategies for online students (in teaching and/or support) are you (or others in your university) using, which you think might be having a positive impact on access, retention and/or academic success?
- Are any of these interventions/strategies being measured/evaluated? In what ways? Do you know of any results?
- What else do you think is important for institutions to do, in relation to online students, to help them stay and succeed?
What do students say they want and need?*

To feel included

▪ …universities don’t really care about or engage with online students very much… external students are a burden they’d rather not have to cater for..

Preparation

▪ I just felt uni didn’t give me that hook to start; you kind of drowned. We need inductions and orientations on how to use stuff.

To be responded to

▪ I’m sort of checking the discussion board to see if anyone’s answered what I might have said… I was just in isolation, teaching myself, that was a big surprise, the lack of interaction...

Well designed materials

▪ …what works in person is not the same as online… I thought it would be more tailor-made for it than what it is.

*Quotes from two studies with online students: Stone, O’Shea, May, Delahunty & Partington (2016); O’Shea, Stone & Delahunty (2015)
What do students say they want and need?*

Connection
- *I guess not having that relationship with people… it would be nice for them [teachers and other staff] to more connect with us students.*

Personal contact
- *It’s nice to hear another human being’s voice, and you just think “Wow, how did you know today was the day that I really needed to have someone check in…?”*

Relevant and timely support
- *They came back to us and said, ‘you all need to redo your referencing for the next assessment’, which was another essay. They gave us no tutorial or anything.*

*Quotes from two studies with online students: Stone, O’Shea, May, Delahunty & Partington (2016); O’Shea, Stone & Delahunty (2015)*
What do HE educators and practitioners say?
Key Findings

1. Strategic whole-of-institution approach

- Online education needs to be recognised as *core business* – not an after-thought

  *It’s not secondary education, and, you know, until the whole university thinks like that and it’s core business, then we’re always pushing things* (Online programs coordinator).

- Know who the students are; recognise their diversity, needs & strengths, and tailor teaching and support interventions accordingly (e.g. flexible, inclusive, accessible for external students)

- Ensure consistency and quality of online education standards, including timely and embedded support

  *I know they’re getting a lesser experience than what my on-campus students are getting and that concerns me greatly* (Lecturer).
2. Intervene early, to connect and prepare

- Tell prospective students what to expect
  
  *I think we need to be a bit more realistic… it’s harder probably doing it online and I think we need to, as institutions… we need to set up realistic expectations.* (Project Coordinator)

- Consider the individual circumstances of prospective students
  
  *If they don't work [employed], then they’re recommended that they should do full-time study and… I don’t think it should be the default. I think that there’s basically a one-size-fits-all sales approach.* (Student Counsellor)

- Provide early personal contact
  
  *What those students said was that [receiving a phone call] made them feel a sense of belonging to [university] because they’d spoken to someone that they felt knew them.* (Library Services Manager)
2. Intervene early, to connect and prepare

- Design orientation to suit and engage off-campus students
  
  *they get a chance to engage in a discussion forum in that first week and introduce themselves and then they get to meet their lecturers during that week.* (Senior Lecturer)

- Facilitate academic preparation
  
  *we’re not doing anywhere near enough to get them to a place where they’re comfortable with being in an academic environment … they really do need to be able to structure an argument, to proofread – all of those sort of basic things.* (Course Coordinator)
3. The vital role of teacher-presence

- Students need to feel that the teacher is in the virtual room with them
  
  someone on the other end of the system listening to them. So, communication and feedback, communication and feedback; you can’t communicate enough with online students. (Senior Lecturer)

- Online teacher is key to building a sense of belonging to a learning community
  
  The tutor of the academic course is the face of the university… it is the human connection point between the student and the university. (Senior Executive)
  The instructor is everything to the students. (Course Coordinator)
4. Design for Online – content & delivery

- **Design completely differently**
  
  …thinking about distance learning or online learning as a different animal to the face-to-face course… it needs to be designed completely differently. (Lecturer)

- **Engage and support through content and delivery**
  
  …allowing opportunities for students to engage with the content online… teacher-presence in the blogs and discussion boards. (Online Curriculum Manager)

- **Strengthen interaction amongst students**
  
  *discussion is the centrepiece of the classroom experience…* (Course Convenor)
5. Contact and connect along the student journey

▪ Reach out to students through a framework of interventions

We reach out to students when we think they may be sort of falling by the wayside, having some difficulties. (Student Services Manager)

▪ Use a range of ways to contact and connect

We’ve initiated a welcome call which is done by students, so it’s a student-to-student communication. (Student Engagement Manager)

▪ Know that it makes a difference

I’ve been able to get my non-completer range right down… the unit I’ve just finished, it’s down to 4%... so it’s really low and I’ve been able to get my fail rate down to 1%. (Course Coordinator)
6. Role of Learning Analytics

- Personalise interventions; even curriculum
  
  *they expect to be remembered… and analytics and other tools help academics and teachers keep up with that.* (Learning Tech Manager)

- Predict who may need extra help/support
  
  *…bringing the data together and, based on predictive models, predicting each student’s risk, using all student data to form that predictive model.* (Data Scientist)

- Inform student interventions
  
  *… we push student data through [and] we take about 200 students a day and contact them.* (Support Services Director)
7. Collaboration to deliver support at point of need

- Academic and professional staff need to work together

  *We have at least one Student Advisor in every School… the network functions across the whole university.* (Student Advisor Coordinator)

- Embed academic support within curriculum

  *So all our level one programs… [include] learning how to learn and so, rather than it’s over here, outside of the discipline base, it’s actually embedded.* (Teaching & Learning Manager)

- Including technology support

  *They need assistance in being able to navigate what to do in a unit, where you find information, what all this material’s about, discussion forums, submitting assignments.* (Deputy Head of School)
National Guidelines for Institutions

1. Know who the students are – make sure the external, online cohort is well understood across the institution

2. Develop, implement & regularly review institution-wide quality standards for online education (continuous quality improvement)

3. Intervene early to address student expectations, build skills and engagement – contact, connect, prepare

4. Explicitly value and support the vital role of ‘teacher-presence’ – e.g. training, resourcing, realistic class sizes and allocated teaching time

5. Design for online – ‘online first’, inclusive, accessible
6. **Engage and support** through curriculum, content and delivery – institutional quality standards

7. Build collaboration across campus to deliver *holistic student support* – integrated, embedded in curriculum

8. Contact and communicate *throughout the student journey* – institutional framework of interventions

9. Make strategic use of learning analytics to inform intervention strategy - *target and personalise student interventions*, including personalising curriculum

10. Invest in online education to ensure both access and opportunity – *core business funded appropriately*
How can this be applied to student support services?

- Institution-wide online education strategy, prioritising comprehensive support across the student journey, championed at senior levels; support for online students is part of core business.

- Demographic information about online student cohorts available to all involved staff - easily accessible and understandable – to assist with planning for engagement, support & success.

- Teamwork approach to student support; academics and professional staff collaborate to provide support when and where it is needed. e.g. embed academic skills & tech support within curriculum; provide out-of-hours, personal support services in ways that external students can easily access.

- Appropriate resourcing of support strategies for online students, including dedicated ongoing funding for support & retention programs; plus the data to underpin these.

- Examples:
  - Early intervention, orientation and academic preparation – designed for online students, both new & prospective e.g. face-to-face options, bringing students to campus & offering outreach; web-based activities; phone calls; video hook-ups.
  - Online student intervention strategy; targeted & personalised messages; based on information from learning analytics & other sources (e.g. referrals), continuing throughout the student journey – ongoing, positive contact.
Full Report available at:

www.ncsehe.edu.au

Or email me at:

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