



**NCSEHE**  
National Centre for Student  
Equity in Higher Education



**Curtin University**

# 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

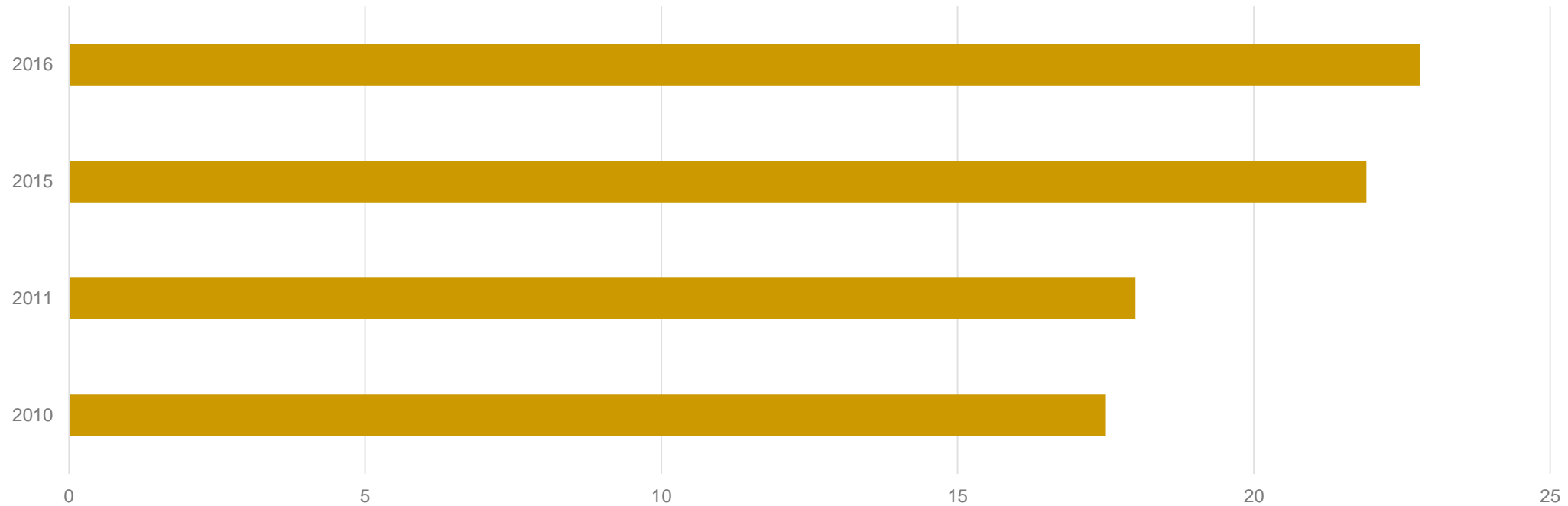
***National Guidelines for improving student outcomes in online learning***

# 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

## 16 Institutions involved

1	<b>Charles Darwin University</b> Metropolitan & remote NT	9	<b>The Open University UK</b> Externally across whole of UK (and internationally)
2	<b>Charles Sturt University</b> Regional NSW	10	<b>RMIT University</b> Metropolitan Victoria
3	<b>Curtin University</b> Metropolitan WA	11	<b>Southern Cross University</b> Regional Queensland
4	<b>Flinders University</b> Metropolitan SA	12	<b>Swinburne University</b> Metropolitan Victoria
5	<b>La Trobe University</b> Metropolitan Victoria	13	<b>University of Newcastle</b> Regional NSW
6	<b>Macquarie University</b> Metropolitan NSW	14	<b>University of New England</b> Regional NSW
7	<b>Murdoch University</b> Metropolitan WA	15	<b>University of Southern Queensland</b> Regional Queensland
8	<b>Open Universities Australia</b> (in partnership with 13 Australian universities)	16	<b>University of Tasmania</b> Metropolitan, regional & remote TAS



# 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

# National Guidelines for Institutions

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](http://www.ncsehe.edu.au)

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