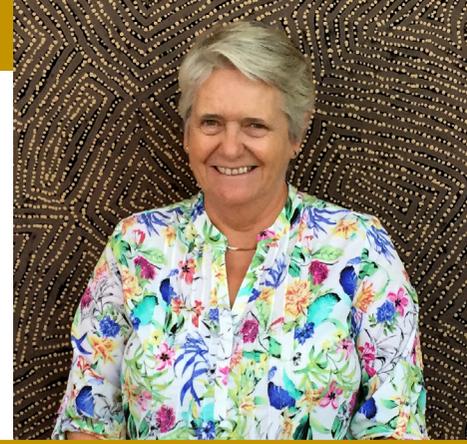


# Equity Fellow News

Project Update for August 2016  
NCSEHE Equity Fellow, Dr Cathy Stone



Opportunity through online learning: improving student access, success and retention in online higher education



## Equity Fellowship Research Project Update

Welcome to this progress update for August 2016. Thanks to all of you for your continued involvement. Please send this bulletin on to any other interested colleagues. As always, I welcome your feedback.

### Placement with the Department of Education and Training

Much of August was spent undertaking a three week placement at the Australian Government Department of Education and Training in Canberra, a requirement of each of the Equity Fellows, for the purposes of information sharing and building communication. I was based with the Equity Policy and Programs team, within the Governance, Quality and Access Unit. This, in turn, is part of the Higher Education Group, within the broader Higher Education, Research and International (HERI) Cluster. I had the opportunity to interact on a day-to-day basis with the staff responsible not only for Equity Policy and Programs (e.g. HEPPP, Equity Policy, Indigenous Policy) but also with those responsible for Student Information and Learning (e.g. HE data, grants, awards, QILT) and for Funding Policy and Legislation (e.g. FEE-HELP, HECS-HELP, Financial Analysis).



**NCSEHE**

National Centre for Student  
Equity in Higher Education



**Curtin University**

Bringing together Higher Education research practitioners with Higher Education policy-makers and administrators, is an innovative and creative feature of the Equity Fellowships, enabling us to learn from each other and to share our different perspectives on student equity. This occurred both informally, through conversation and discussion, as well as more formally through meetings and presentations.

## Progress on Research

Ninety-four participants have been interviewed since the start of the project. During August, a further two Australian universities (Southern Cross University and Flinders University) provided institutional consent for their participation, bringing the total number of participating institutions to 16. Interviews have been completed at nine institutions, while interviews at the remaining seven universities have been scheduled for September and October. See progress table below:

Participating Institutions		Progress with Interviews
1	The Open University, UK	Completed
2	OUA	Completed
3	Swinburne	Completed
4	RMIT	Completed
5	Murdoch	Completed
6	Macquarie	Completed
7	Curtin	Completed
8	La Trobe	Completed
9	UON	Completed
10	USQ	September
11	UNE	September
12	CDU	September
13	UTAS	September
14	SCU	September
15	CSU	September / October
16	Flinders	October

Transcription of interviews continued during August, as did thematic analysis of the data generated, using NVivo 11.

## Dissemination of Progress and Preliminary Findings

A presentation on the project, its progress and some preliminary findings was given at the “HERI Bite-Size Seminar Series” at the Department of Education and Training. A similar presentation is scheduled for the University of Southern Queensland’s “Social Justice Symposium” on 8 September. Whilst in Canberra, I also met with a number of academic, learning design and educational technology staff, from both ANU and the University of Canberra, to discuss the project. Interest in receiving regular updates continues to grow, with 181 people on the mailing list for these bulletins, which are now also available on the NCSEHE website at [www.ncsehe.edu.au/news-events/newsletters/](http://www.ncsehe.edu.au/news-events/newsletters/)

## This Month’s ‘Snapshot’ from Findings: Building a Community of Learning

The importance of building and developing a Community of Learning, to which online students feel engaged and committed, has been continually raised by academic and professional staff in interviews so far, as one of the most important considerations in improving online student retention and success. Below are just a few examples from the data, in which staff from different institutions discuss and describe the importance of a strong Community of Learning; what also comes across in a number of these quotes is the view that this is dependent not only on the efforts of the individual staff involved, but also on the commitment and approach of the institution as a whole.

If you have great content and a poor tutor, student satisfaction is low. If you have great content, great tutor – high satisfaction. Poor content, great tutor – reasonable to high satisfaction. It’s your tutor that can make or break so it comes back to that community of learning. If you’ve got both, you’ve got a very satisfied customer and we have to remember, they’re not online because they can’t come to campus; they’re online because they’ve made the choice to be online and 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.

(Program Coordinator – metro university, Australia)

You can have a mechanism or a structure, but it won’t be that in itself that will determine whether or not it succeeds, because there has to be the buy-in by everybody who’s involved, and they have to understand what’s been done, why and how, so that they’re bringing the students along with it.

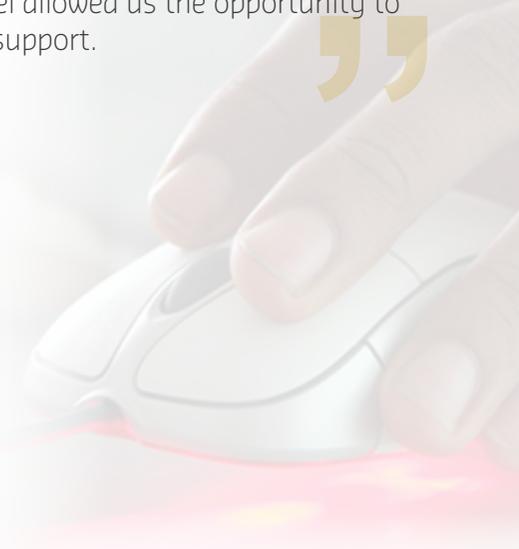
(Course Coordinator, metro university, Australia)



For online students and retention and success, yeah, for me the short answer is fostering students' sense of belonging to a learning community.  
(Course Coordinator, regional university, Australia)

OUA classes for a long time weren't fully integrated into our workload models and so we found that we didn't have casual or tutorial support to manage that online mediation and discussion so that was also very challenging... Now we have more dedicated support staff to focus on the online discussion elements of the classes, the forums, and to be able to give those students a sense of actually speaking to someone who's dedicated to talking back at them... and it's also allowed us to explore more innovative ways to engage with the online students apart from just forums... [and] it made a huge difference in terms of student retention.  
(Coordinator, Learning & Teaching, OUA Provider University)

Finding ways of ensuring that students feel they belong is an incredibly important aspect and one of the things that has driven [introduction of] Student Support teams... support ... through the curriculum of their choice rather than generic [and] the Student Support team model allowed us the opportunity to contextualise that support.  
(Open University, UK)



## Want to know more? Got any feedback?

For any questions or feedback, or to be added to the mailing list to receive these updates in the future, please contact me on [cathy.stone@newcastle.edu.au](mailto:cathy.stone@newcastle.edu.au) or 0410-348-794, or find them at: [www.ncsehe.edu.au/news-events/newsletters/](http://www.ncsehe.edu.au/news-events/newsletters/)