

Equity Fellow News

Project Update for July 2016
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Opportunity through online learning: improving student access, success and retention in online higher education



Equity Fellowship Research Project Update

Welcome to the update for July on the progress of this research. Interest in this project continues to grow, with the distribution list for these bulletins now numbering 142. Thanks to all of you for your continued involvement and please send this bulletin on to any other interested colleagues.

Progress through July

During July, a further 25 participants were interviewed, across five institutions, bringing the total number of participants by 31 July to 93. A further four Australian universities (Charles Sturt University, Charles Darwin University, the University of Tasmania and La Trobe University) provided institutional consent for their participation, bringing the total number of participating institutions to 14. See updated progress table below.



NCSEHE

National Centre for Student
Equity in Higher Education



Curtin University

Participating Institutions	Progress with Interviews	Participating Staff
The Open University, UK	Completed	22
OUA	Completed	12
Swinburne	Completed	12
RMIT	Completed	12
Murdoch	Completed	10
Macquarie	Completed	5
Curtin	Completed	15
La Trobe	In progress	2
UON	In progress	3
USQ	Scheduled	
UNE	Scheduled	
CDU	Scheduled	
UTAS	Scheduled	
CSU	To be arranged	
Total staff interviewed		93

Visits to USQ, UNE, UTAS and CDU have been scheduled for September.

Dissemination of progress and preliminary findings

A presentation was given at the HERDSA conference on 5 July in Fremantle and at the 2016 Higher Education Summit on 14 July in Melbourne. I am also offering brief presentations at each participating university; e.g. a presentation will be given at a Social Justice seminar on 8 September at the University of Southern Queensland.

Key theme for the month: Importance of teacher presence

This month I am highlighting two examples of the effective use of teacher-presence to engage, support and retain online students in their learning.



Maintaining a strong tutor presence throughout the course: example from a casual tutor at an Australian Metropolitan University

This is but one of many, many examples of tutor dedication to online students. Below are just a few of the steps taken by one particular tutor to try to provide a sense of 'being there' for the student, despite the lack of a physical presence.

- **Creating an obvious presence** through welcome posts at the start, welcoming students by name, introducing self.
- **Posting a weekly good morning** and welcome to week X - reminding about upcoming deadlines, assessments etc.
- **Providing personal recognition** to individual students who reach particular milestones
- **Personal emails to make contact with 'missing' students:** e.g. week 3 email to all students who have not logged in or appeared in the discussions
- **Email contact with students** who have logged in but not submitted assessments to check if they are OK.
- **Providing extensive feedback on first assessment** and guidance where required, as well as general feedback post with instructions about how to access/interpret individual feedback.
- **Scanning all discussion posts every day.** Aiming to ensure no one person is dominating, netiquette is being observed and providing additional prods on points if necessary.
- **Trying to solve problems that day** (technical issues, missing readings etc.), or finding alternative solutions.

This tutor consistently achieves very high student satisfaction ratings and retention/completion rates for the units/courses taught, as well as being nominated for a Teacher Excellence Award by the students. However, it should be noted that tutors can spend many personal hours on student contact, over and above their paid hours which are often not sufficient to ensure an effective level of contact.

Mid-module personal conversations between tutor and students: example of a pilot study from the Open University, UK

A pilot study run at the Open University UK, in which students who, by mid-module, were deemed to be 'at risk' as evidenced by problems with completing and/or passing assessments, were contacted by phone by their tutor. Paid time was allocated to the tutors for the calls, which were designed to motivate the student to complete the module and to help them develop a strategy to pass further assessments. Tutors were knowledgeable about support services available to students and the referral process, due to the structure at the OU of Student Support Teams (SSTs) which bring Faculty and Support staff together in discipline-related teams.

Results showed that of 'at risk' students with whom their tutor managed to speak, 65% passed; while of 'at risk' students with whom their tutor did not manage to speak, only 35% passed. Similarly positive results were also found using a 'predictive model' for determining the at-risk students to be called by phone. The study concludes that: "personalised telephone guidance from their tutor improves the chances of 'at risk' students passing their module" and also stresses the need for appropriate funding for the tutor to make the calls.

What next?

During August I am undertaking a placement at the Australian Government Department of Education and Training, which is a requirement of each of the Equity Fellows, for the purposes of information sharing and building communication. Analysis of data and liaison with participating universities will continue and further examples of effective practice will be discussed in the coming months.

Want to know more?

For further information, or to be added to the mailing list to receive these updates in the future, please contact me on cathy.stone@newcastle.edu.au or 0410-348-794.

References

Woodthorpe, John (2015), "Improving student attainment and completion through mid-module tutor conversations," *SST Enhancement Digest*, Issue 2 (July), p.2-5. (Internal publication by the Teaching and Learning Unit, The Open University UK.)