



Equity Fellow News

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



Equity Fellowship Research Project Update

Welcome to the end-of-June update on the progress of this research. Thank you to all participants for your involvement, as well as to the NCSEHE at Curtin University and CEEHE at the University of Newcastle, for their ongoing support of this project.

Progress Through June

A presentation on the project and its preliminary findings was made at the STARS (Students, Transition, Achievement, Retention & Success) conference held in Perth at the end of June, with much interest and useful feedback generated.

Interviews were conducted with 33 university staff members across four institutions, bringing the total number of staff interviewed to 69. As shown in the table below, the number of participating institutions rose to 10.



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Participating Institutions	Progress with Interviews	Number of Staff Interviewed
The Open University, UK	Completed	22
OUA	Completed	12
Swinburne	Completed	12
RMIT	Completed	12
Murdoch	In progress	8
Macquarie	In progress	3
Curtin	Scheduled for July	
USQ	Scheduled for September	
UON	Scheduled for July	
UNE	To be arranged	
Total staff interviewed		69

Seven other Australian universities have been invited to participate.

Emerging themes

Themes outlined in the May progress bulletin continued to emerge strongly from the qualitative interview data, as well as from several evaluations of pilot studies and other strategies that have been measured, where this is available and able to be shared.

From listening also to the online student voice, using data from my and colleagues' previous Australian research with students studying online (O'Shea, Stone & Delahunty, 2015; Stone, O'Shea, May, Delahunty & Partington, 2015) as well as other relevant literature, these emerging themes appear to be closely correlating with students' concerns and challenges.

Listed below are just a few examples of themes that link closely to students' lived experience. The student quotes are taken directly from the two studies mentioned above while the staff quotes are taken directly from data gathered so far within this project.

1. Importance of institution-wide approach to online learning:

"Realising that...universities don't really care about or engage with online students very much. In fact, I think a lot of them think external students are a burden they would rather not have to cater for." (Student)

"It was sort of marginalised, probably because it wasn't understood.... and still I think there's an innate prejudice against online teaching." (Academic)



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2. Importance of the Tutor/Student relationship:

"I guess the lows for me is just, I guess not having that relationship with people I guess... I know that the lecturers are lovely and they're very helpful and all that but I guess it would be nice for them to more connect with us students." (Student)

"The tutor of the academic course is the face of the university, and when I say "face" it doesn't mean literally a face; it can just be a name or a voice at the end of an online conversation, but it is the human connection point between the student and the university which I think can often make all the difference." (Learning Designer)

3. Importance of appropriate and engaging Learning Design:

"What works in person is not the same as online... I thought it would just be more, sort of, more tailor made for it than what it is." (Student)

"Making sure that content actually promotes engagement because you could have content there with a bunch of PDFs and a bunch of boring stuff – that will not trigger engagement." (Academic)

What next?

During July I am conducting interviews with staff at Curtin University and the University of Newcastle, as well as completing interviews with Macquarie and Murdoch staff. A further conference presentation has been given at the HERDSA conference on 5 July in Fremantle plus an invited presentation is scheduled for the 2016 Higher Education Summit on 14 July in Melbourne. Analysis of data will continue and further interviews will be conducted at participating universities. Preparations are underway for the placement in August at the Department of Education in Canberra, which is a requirement of each of the Equity Fellows, for the purposes of information sharing that I am sure will be mutually very useful and interesting.

I would welcome feedback from participants receiving this bulletin, as well as from any other interested recipient. Please feel free to send this on to any of your colleagues.

Want to know more?

If anyone would like more information, or would like to be added to the mailing list to receive these updates, please contact me on cathy.stone@newcastle.edu.au or 0410-348-794

References

O'Shea, S., Stone, C. & Delahunty, J. (2015) "I 'feel' like I am at university even though I am online" Exploring how students narrate their engagement with higher education institutions in an online learning environment', *Distance Education*, 36:1, 41-58.

Stone, C., O'Shea, S., May, J., Delahunty, J. & Partington, Z. (2016) 'Opportunity through online learning: Experiences of first-in-family students in online open-entry higher education', *Australian Journal of Adult Learning*, 56: 2, 149-169.

