



Equity Fellow News

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



Equity Fellowship Research Project Update

Welcome to the first of what will be regular monthly updates on the progress of this research. Thank you to all those who have agreed to participate in this project and particularly to those who have already been interviewed. Many thanks also for the interest and support that I am receiving for this project from the NCSEHE, which is funding this project, as well as from the Centre of Excellence in Equity in Higher Education (CEEHE) at the University of Newcastle, which employs me. The University of Newcastle's Human Ethics Committee has also been responsible for granting ethical approval for the project to be undertaken.

Who is involved?

So far, the following Institutions have consented to be involved as participants: The Open University UK; Open Universities Australia (OUA); Macquarie; RMIT; Swinburne; Curtin; Murdoch and the University of New England. I am in discussion with six other Australian universities, all of which offer substantial distance/online undergraduate programs, and I am waiting on their final response.

I have interviewed a range of academic and professional staff at both the Open University UK (a total of 22 staff during March and April) and at OUA (13 staff in May) and have begun interviews with Macquarie staff (1 completed with 3 more scheduled for June/July). Interviews are in the process of being scheduled for June/July at Swinburne, RMIT, Curtin and Murdoch.



Opportunity through online learning

Emerging themes

During initial analysis of the data gathered so far, the following themes are emerging – and I am sure that none of these will come as any surprise to anyone working in online learning.

- Relationship between class tutor and students is of key importance to student engagement – i.e. tutor who is a regular and responsive ‘presence’ and who provides prompt feedback and support; implications for tutor-student ratios and realistic resourcing;
- Need for institution-wide recognition of the diversity and special needs of the online student body, e.g. high proportions of mature-age, working part-time or full-time, family and caring responsibilities, first-in-family at university, no or low entry qualifications, many with disability;
- Collaboration between teaching and support is crucial, as is embedding learning skills and support within curriculum as well as easily accessed, proactive and well-promoted additional assistance outside it;
- Regular engagement contact points between students, tutors and student support services, instigated by the institution, that reaches out to students, is personalised and targeted along the student journey;
- Role of learning analytics in determining those ‘at risk’, tailoring interventions and ensuring personal contact at appropriate times; the more ‘personal’ and relevant the intervention the more successful;
- ‘Front-loading’ of interventions – to explore student expectations, provide a more realistic understanding of what’s involved, build sense of belonging and ‘someone cares’, improve early engagement and reduce early departure;
- Importance of learning design in engaging and retaining students
- Data from OU (UK) and OUA demonstrating that retention and completion of modules/units raised significantly by early personal contact by phone (from tutor at OU and from student advisors at OUA) to new students; also data clearly demonstrating positive relationship between Preparatory studies (Access modules at OU; PREP units at OUA) and pass rates/completion/retention;
- Examples of valuable pilots and projects with promising results; a need for more/improved measuring/evaluation of strategies as well as mainstreaming those shown by pilots and projects to be successful (again, implications for resourcing);
- Student acquisition and student retention of equal importance – again, funding implications;
- Peer-to-peer support underdeveloped – scope to encourage more/improved strategies;
- Impact of wider issues of higher education and funding policy when they are largely geared around ‘traditional on-campus full-time school leaver’ students; can create challenges for both institutions and individual students.

What next?

Each month I will be providing an update on progress as I gather and analyse more data, with the aim being to produce a final report containing National Guidelines for improving the access, success and retention of students in online undergraduate education. This report is due by the end of March 2017.

I would welcome feedback from participants receiving this bulletin, as well as from any other interested recipient.

Want to know more?

If you would like to be involved in this research or would like more information, please contact me on cathy.stone@newcastle.edu.au or 0410-348-794

