

# Equity Fellow News

Project Update for October/November 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 last of my progress updates for 2016. The Final Report from this exciting project will be coming out by the end of March 2017, so stay tuned!

### Progress during October and November

October and November 2016 saw the completion of qualitative interviews, with face-to-face interviews at Flinders University and telephone interviews with staff at Charles Sturt University. This brings the final number of interviewees to 150, across 16 higher education institutions; 15 in Australia, plus the Open University UK.

The table below provides a list of the participating institutions, including their key locations.



**NCSEHE**

National Centre for Student  
Equity in Higher Education



**Curtin University**

**Table 1** Participating institutions

Participating Institutions	Key Location/s
1 The Open University, UK	Various locations in the UK, metropolitan & regional
2 Open Universities Australia	Offers online HE units and courses provided by 13 universities around Australia, both metropolitan & regional/remote in VIC, NSW, QLD, NT, WA & SA
3 Swinburne University*	Metropolitan VIC
4 RMIT University*	Metropolitan VIC
5 Macquarie University*	Metropolitan NSW
6 Murdoch University*	Metropolitan & regional WA
7 Curtin University*	Metropolitan & regional WA
8 La Trobe University*	Metropolitan & regional VIC
9 The University of Newcastle	Regional NSW
10 The University of Southern Queensland	Regional QLD
11 The University of New England*	Regional NSW
12 Charles Darwin University*	Metropolitan, regional & remote NT
13 The University of Tasmania	Metropolitan & regional TAS
14 Southern Cross University	Regional NSW & QLD
15 Charles Sturt University	Regional NSW
16 Flinders University	Metropolitan & regional SA; remote NT

\* In addition to offering their own online programs, these universities also provide a number of OUA online units and courses.



## Preliminary findings

As more interviews have been conducted and analysed, the preliminary findings are becoming increasingly well-defined. The bullet points below summarise the factors that continue to emerge most strongly from the data as being of crucial significance in successfully engaging and retaining online students.

- Institution-wide recognition and understanding of the diversity and needs of the online student body; offering adequate institutional flexibility in response
- Strategic institutional approach to ensure consistency and quality of online delivery and teaching standards, including teacher training and adequate resourcing
- Early interventions to ensure realistic student expectations, facilitate appropriate preparation and improve early engagement
- Vital role of “online teacher presence” in building sense of belonging to a learning community
- Learning design, curriculum and pedagogy that are engaging, supportive and specific to online delivery
- Collaboration between teaching and support, embedding support within curriculum, including help with technology
- Harnessing the capacity of learning analytics to inform appropriate interventions, personalised and targeted along the student journey

## Dissemination

During November there will be several presentations on the project and its findings; at the [Conversations about Retaining and Engaging First-in-Family learners in HE Forum](#) at the University of Wollongong, the [NCSEHE 2016 National Research Forum](#) in Canberra and the [AARE Conference](#) in Melbourne. The number of people on the mailing list for progress updates has grown to 243, with the monthly updates also published [here](#) on the NCSEHE webpage. Each progress update attempts to provide a glimpse of the data that is informing the key findings emerging. In this update, the importance of early intervention is highlighted.

## 'Snapshot' from findings: Importance of Early Intervention

The interview data shows strong agreement, across different universities, disciplines and areas of work, about the importance of early intervention, to realistically address student expectations and help them develop the academic and technology skills necessary for online higher education. One common concern, reflected by the quotes below, is that messages used to market online courses may not be helping new and prospective students understand the realities of online study.

I think a lot of students walk into an online course without really knowing how much they are going to be left to their own devices and, in fact, it's sold to them in that way, "If you work full-time and you have five kids you can do your degree online". (Australian metropolitan university)

The marketing message... the perception that it sometimes creates, that online learning is quite easy and everything's accessible. I think when we're working in the first-in-family, low SES space, there's probably more we could do around creating an understanding of what successful study looks like, how you do it, particularly in those early years. (Australian regional university)

Diagnostic quizzes, surveys and specific conversations, are being used in a number of institutions to help address these expectations and to explore additional preparation that may be needed. For example:

We do ask questions around time commitments, those sorts of things... and we give immediate feedback from the survey with strategies, as well as referring to other university services as well. So we know for a lot of our students they are coming on board with a lot of other commitments, family or otherwise. (Australian metropolitan university)

In some cases, we will say "We think you might need to gain some extra skills before you can study with us". We will encourage them to study in advance, the preparatory materials, and, crucially, to make them aware of the intensity of it and the volume of work that's involved. (Open University UK)



## What's next?

With the qualitative data-collection phase of the project now complete, the final stage of the project will be spent on completing the data analysis and collating other relevant data, including evidence from national and international literature, all of which will inform the final report. I am extremely grateful to the 16 institutions and the 150 participants within them, for their time, interest and enthusiasm, which has made this project possible. I look forward to being able to send all of you the final report in the New Year.

## Questions or feedback?

Please contact me on [cathy.stone@newcastle.edu.au](mailto:cathy.stone@newcastle.edu.au) for any questions or feedback. All [past copies](#) of progress updates can be accessed from the NCSEHE website.