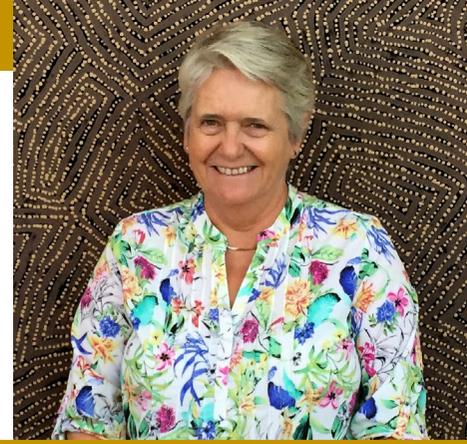


# Equity Fellow News

Project Update for September 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 September 2016. Once again, my thanks for your involvement and interest in this research. I invite you to forward this to interested colleagues and I look forward to any feedback.

### Progress during September

September was a very busy month involving visits to five universities in regional and remote areas around the country: the University of Southern Queensland at Toowoomba, QLD; the University of New England in Armidale, NSW; the Lismore (NSW) Campus of Southern Cross University; both the Launceston and Hobart campuses of the University of Tasmania; and Charles Darwin University in the Northern Territory. At each of these universities, distance students are strongly represented and in many Faculties and Schools they form the majority of the student cohort. As a result, regional universities tend to view distance and online teaching and learning very much as 'core business'.



**NCSEHE**

National Centre for Student  
Equity in Higher Education

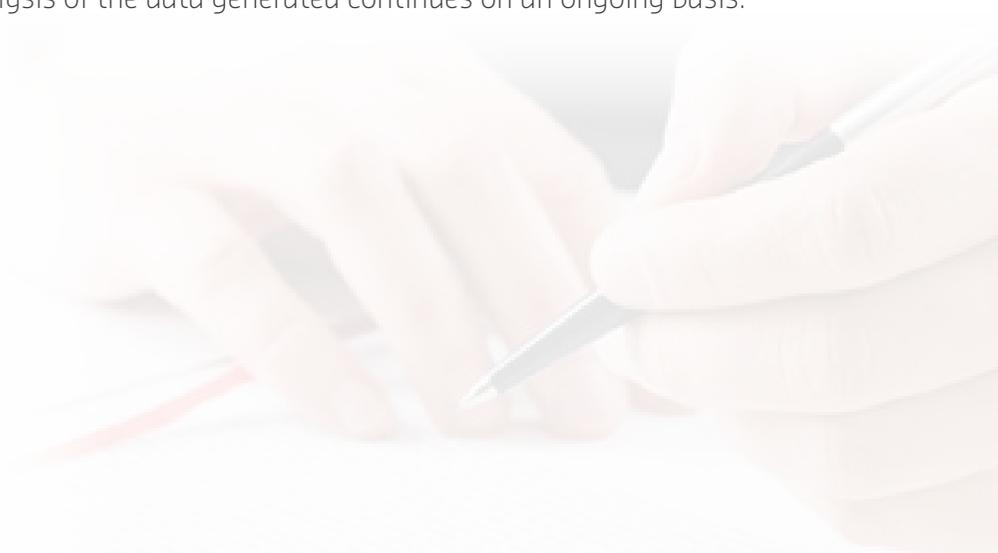


**Curtin University**

Interviews through September brought the total number of university staff participating in this project so far to 138. Interviews have now been completed at 14 institutions, with planning in place to conduct interviews at a further two universities in 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	Completed
11	UNE	Completed
12	CDU	Completed
13	UTAS	Completed
14	SCU	Completed
15	CSU	October
16	Flinders	October

Transcription of the interviews and analysis of the data generated continues on an ongoing basis.



## Dissemination of Progress and Preliminary Findings

A presentation on the project, its progress and preliminary findings was given at the University of Southern Queensland's [Social Justice Symposium](#) on 8 September, with similar presentations given at Southern Cross University, the University of New England and the University of Tasmania, to groups of interested academic and professional staff. These presentations have generated further interest in the project, with the mailing list for progress reports now numbering 230. Reports from previous months can be found [here](#), on the NCSEHE webpage.

## This Month's 'Snapshot' from Findings: Understanding the Student Cohort

Continually raised in interviews, by both academic and professional staff, is the importance of knowing who the students are and understanding their particular characteristics – both in terms of the strengths they bring with them to study and also in terms of their particular needs. Through knowing more about the cohort, many staff argue that it then becomes possible to provide a more personalised experience, such as offering greater flexibility where needed. It can also help staff to encourage students to appreciate and draw upon their past and current life and work experience to aid them in their studies, rather than discounting it.

The following quote from a staff member, who manages a student engagement program at a regional university where distance students are in the majority, reflects on the existing capacities that many online students bring with them to their studies:

**If there's an Education student, a mother who's got three kids who's returning to... or going back to work, wants to be a teacher, doing Education, she might be running the P&C, doing reading groups at school, all of which are relevant to their course of study... it came to me sort of an epiphany when one student... I said "Well, you tell me what you do" and she said "I'm just a mum. I just run the P&C, I organise the \$100,000 fete every year" and all these other things...**



This same staff member goes on to discuss ways in which the institution can encourage and support such students positively, without taking a deficit approach:

**Just being...understanding, knowing that their lives are all very complicated and making allowance for it; and don't take a deficit approach that they shouldn't be here if they can't fit into our structure – that we try and be as flexible and make... yeah, giving everybody the opportunity to succeed rather than trying to force them through unnecessary hoops... I think we could be a lot more accommodating and understanding and recognising that this is the real life of these people.**

The importance of understanding students' circumstances and offering greater flexibility accordingly is representative of the views expressed by many others. For example, a Coordinator within a student Engagement and Retention area of a regional university makes the comment that, "I don't think we're moving quickly enough to be responsive to the sort of students that we're accepting..." while an academic with responsibility for an online Pathways Program at another regional university says the following:

**I do think universities operate in a not very flexible way sometimes. You know, we have policies obviously that have to be followed and procedures and guidelines which are all couched in terms which allow us to bend them a little bit under exceptional circumstances and there's a lot of rhetoric about the need for flexibility in the institutions and so on, but fundamentally, there's not the degree of flexibility that students – a proportion of students – would like there to be in order to be successful... I think institutions could do more to be a bit more accommodating and flexible in their approach to supporting students.**



## Plans for October

Following some planned leave in the first half of October I will be visiting Adelaide towards the end of the month to interview staff at Flinders University. In the meantime, I also hope to be conducting interviews by phone and Skype with staff at Charles Sturt University, which will complete the data-gathering phase of the project.

## Questions or Feedback?

Please contact me on [cathy.stone@newcastle.edu.au](mailto:cathy.stone@newcastle.edu.au) for any questions or feedback, or to be added to the mailing list to receive future monthly progress reports. All [past copies](#) can be accessed from the NCSEHE website.