



# OPPORTUNITY THROUGH ONLINE LEARNING

Improving access, participation and success in online higher education

# Background to the project

One of three Equity Fellowships offered for 2016 by the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education (NCSEHE)

Investigate engagement, teaching and support strategies for domestic u/g online students in Australia and at Open University UK

Qualitative interviews across a range of HE institutions offering online undergraduate studies, to seek combined wisdom of practitioners on *what is most important* to help students stay & succeed

**National Guidelines for improving student outcomes in online education**

# Why look at online learning?

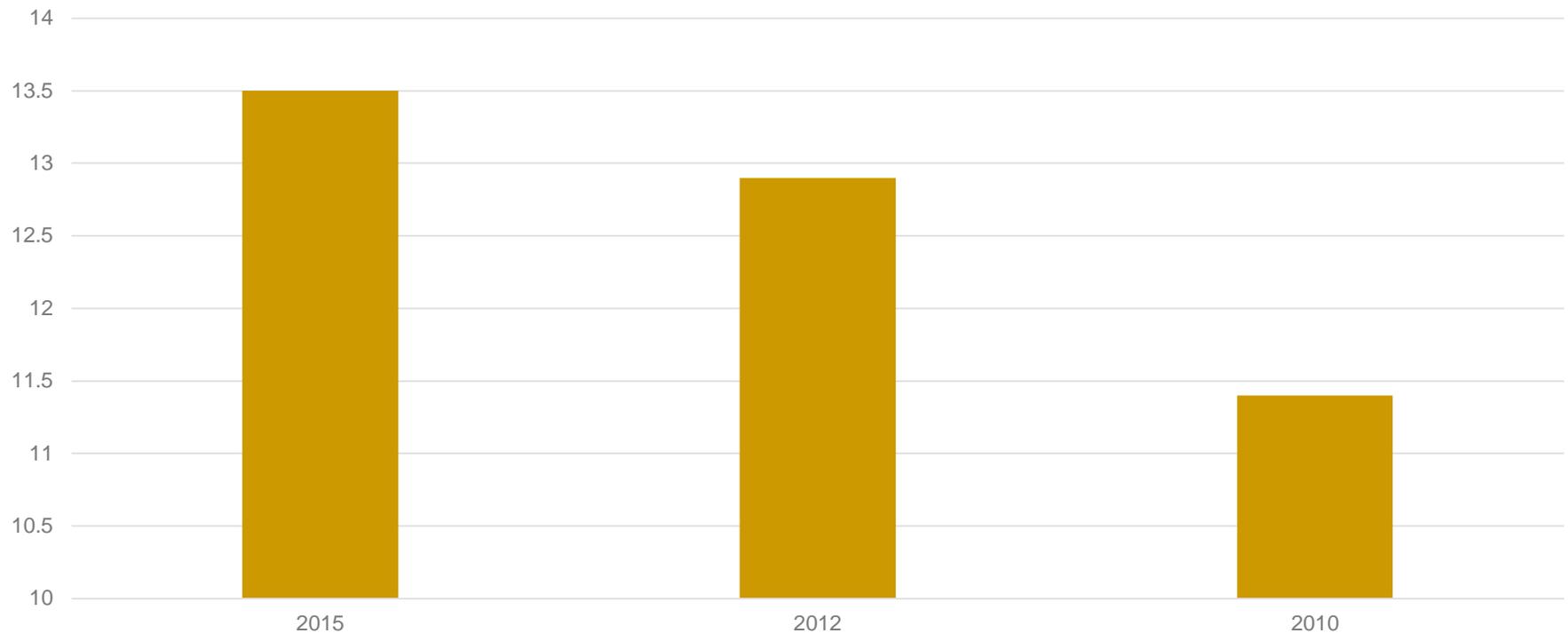
- Online learning has a critical and growing place in widening access and participation in Higher Education for diverse student cohorts, including *high numbers of first-in-family*.
- Students from backgrounds *historically under-represented* at university are *more strongly represented* in online studies, particularly where lack of entry quals not a barrier (via open-access pathways, mature-age entry programs etc).
- At the start of 2015:
  - 405,697 commencing students in Australian HE
  - 54,769 (13.5 per cent) enrolled in fully external (online) mode.\*

\* <https://docs.education.gov.au>

# Growth in online learning

Percentage of fully external (online) commencing students from 2010 to 2015 across all Australian universities\*

\*<https://docs.education.gov.au>



# Example of online student cohort

Open Universities Australia 2015\*

(32,496 online students across 13 Australian universities)

Domestic Student cohorts	OUA	All enrolments nationally
First in Family	68%	51%
Low SES	20%	16%
Regional/Remote	22%	20%
Disability	7%	5.8%
Indigenous	2.5%	1.5%
Age 25+	68%	38%

\*OUA student data reports & <https://docs.education.gov.au>

# Example of online student cohort

Open University UK 2014/2015\*

- Nearly 174,000 students
- 76 per cent work full or part time
- 82 per cent aged 25+
- 15 per cent with disability (national average seven per cent)
- 21 per cent living in most deprived areas (national average 11.4 per cent).

\* Open University UK Student Data Report, 2015

# Poorer retention/success for online students

- Online student cohort has a poorer rate of completion of studies compared with on-campus students.
- In Australia, 46.6 per cent of fully online domestic students completed bachelor degrees between 2005-2013; compared with national figure of 76.6 per cent for domestic on-campus students.\*
- More than one in five (20.4 per cent) did not complete their first year, compared with 6.9 per cent first year attrition amongst on-campus students.\*

\* Australian Government Education and Training Report (2015)

# How can we improve opportunities?

- How to widen access AND help more online students persist and succeed?
- Equity Fellowship seeking answers to this question.
- 16 higher education institutions participated – 15 in Australia + OU (UK).
- Interviews with 151 staff, all involved in development, coordination and/or delivery of:
  - *online programs (primarily undergraduate)*
  - *support, success and retention strategies for online students.*
- Final report in progress, due end-March 2017.

	16 Institutions involved	OUA Provider
1	Open University UK	
2	Open Universities Australia	
3	Swinburne University	✓
4	RMIT University	✓
5	Macquarie University	✓
6	Murdoch University	✓
7	Curtin University	✓
8	University of Newcastle	
9	La Trobe University	✓
10	University of Southern Queensland	
11	University of New England	✓
12	Charles Darwin University	✓
13	University of Tasmania	
14	Southern Cross University	
15	Charles Sturt University	
16	Flinders University	

# Qualitative interviews about...

- What interventions/strategies for online students (in teaching and/or support) are you (or others in your university) using, which you think might be having a positive impact on access, retention and/or academic success?
- Are any of these interventions/strategies being measured/evaluated? In what ways? Do you know of any results?
- What else do you think is important for institutions to do, in relation to online students, to help them stay and succeed?

# What do online students say?

- The findings from this project have also been informed by research into student experiences of online learning including:
  1. 2013: 19 interviews and 38 surveys with online students at a regional university and at Open Universities Australia (*O'Shea, Stone & Delahunty, 2015*)
  2. 2014: 43 interviews and 44 surveys with first-in-family online students as part of a wider study of three cohorts of first-in-family students – enabling, on-campus undergrads and online undergrads (*Stone, O'Shea, May, Delahunty & Partington, 2016*).

# Key findings: what's most important?

1. Online learning delivery and support requires a strategic, institution-wide approach; to know the students; to fund and resource appropriately; to set quality standards.
2. Early intervention with students is essential, to connect, prepare and engage.
3. 'Teacher presence' is vital to building student engagement, sense of belonging to a learning community.
4. Learning design, content and delivery must be engaging, supportive and specific for the online environment.

# Key findings: what's most important?

5. Regular and structured contact points provide connection and direction along the student journey.
6. Learning analytics has an important role in informing and targeting appropriate and effective interventions.
7. Collaboration across the university is essential; to embed support in curriculum; integrated and available at point of need.

# 1. Strategic institutional approach

*...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'd rather not have to cater for. (Online student)*

- Know the students - recognise their diversity and needs.

*The only thing I know about the students is their name as they appear in the grade book in the course and if they put a location I know that. (Lecturer, Institution K)*

- Ensure consistency and quality of online delivery and teaching standards, including teacher training and adequate resourcing.

*I know they're getting a lesser experience than what my on-campus students are getting and that concerns me greatly. (Lecturer, Institution L)*

*The big issue... is the lack of tutor training in external studies; we don't actually train people who are teaching in external units how to be a tutor online... (Student Retention Coordinator, Institution P)*

## 2. Intervene early, to connect and prepare

*I just felt uni didn't give me that hook to start; you kind of drowned if that makes sense. We need inductions and just orientations on just how to use stuff.*  
(Online student)

- Tell prospective students what to expect.

*I think we need to be a bit more realistic... it's harder probably doing it online and I think we need to, as institutions... we need to set up realistic expectations.*  
(Project Coordinator, Institution F)

- Consider the circumstances of individual prospective students.

*If they don't work, then they're recommended that they should do full-time study and... I don't think it should be the default. I think that there's basically a one-size-fits-all sales approach.* (Student Counsellor, Institution E)

- Provide early personal contact.

*What those students said was that [receiving a phone call] made them feel a sense of belonging to [university] because they'd spoken to someone that they felt knew them.* (Library Services Assistant Director, Institution G)

## 2. Intervene early, to connect and prepare

- Design orientation to suit and engage off-campus students.

*they meet the student liaison officer, they get a chance to engage in a discussion forum in that first week and introduce themselves and then they get to meet their lecturers during that week. (Senior Lecturer, Institution O)*

- Facilitate academic preparation.

*we're not doing anywhere near enough to get them to a place where they're comfortable with being in an academic environment ... they really do need to be able to structure an argument, to proofread – all of those sort of basic things. (Course Coordinator, Institution H)*

### Examples (just a few!)

- Online Enabling/Access Programs; UON; Curtin; OU.
- Open-access online preparatory courses; OUA (Stone et. al, 2013); UON.
- Student Advisor/Student coaching calls (range of institutions).

# 3. The vital role of teacher presence

*I'm sort of checking the discussion board to see if anyone's answered what I might have said. I was surprised that I was just in isolation, teaching myself, that was a big surprise, the lack of interaction... (Online student)*

- Students need to feel that the teacher is in the virtual room with them.

*someone on the other end of the system listening to them. So, communication and feedback, communication and feedback, communication... you can't communicate enough with online students. (Senior Lecturer, Institution K)*

- Online teacher is key to building a sense of belonging to a learning community.

*The tutor of the academic course is the face of the university... it is the human connection point between the student and the university which I think can often make all the difference. (Senior Executive, Institution B)*

*The instructor is everything to the students. (Course Coordinator, Institution M)*

# 4. Learning design, content and delivery must be engaging and specific to online

*...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. (Online student)*

- Design for online.

*...thinking about distance learning or online learning as a different animal to the face-to-face course and it needs to be treated as such and designed completely differently for that mode of delivery. (Lecturer, Institution L)*

- Engage and support through content and delivery.

*...allowing opportunities for students to engage with the content online. It could be as simple as putting a little quiz after a video so “Watch this video, do this quiz. How did you go? ... teacher presence in the blogs and discussion boards, responding to questions and comments... (Online Curriculum Manager, Institution D)*

## Example:

- Parsell’s “Standards for Online Education” (2014).

# 5. Contact and connect along the student journey

*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. (Online student)*

- Reach out to students through a framework of interventions.

*We reach out to students when we think they may be sort of falling by the wayside, having some difficulties. (Student Services Manager, Institution B)*

- Use a range of ways to contact and connect.

*We've made distance students our priority in nearly everything we've done. We've initiated a welcome call which is done by students, so it's a student-to-student communication. (Student Engagement Manager, Institution Q)*

- Know that it makes a difference.

*I've been able to get my non-completer range right down to, I think it's... well, the unit I've just finished, it's down to 4%... so it's really low and I've been able to get my fail rate down to 1%. (Course Coordinator, Institution H)*

## Example:

- MILLS Framework, OU (Slade & Prinsloo, 2015).

# 6. Role of learning analytics

*It's nice to hear another human being's voice, just to let you know how you're going, and you just think "Wow, how did you know today was the day that I really needed to have someone check in...?" (Online student)*

- Inform student interventions.

*We mapped out behaviours that we'd see in the classroom that might indicate someone's disengaging or potentially disengaging... we push student data through [and] that gives us a 'score' for every student... we take about 200 students a day and contact them. (Director, Support Services, Institution O)*

- Personalise interventions; even curriculum.

*they expect to be remembered... and analytics and other tools help academics and teachers keep up with that. (Head of Learning Technology, Institution E)*

- Predict who may need extra help/support.

*...bringing the data together and, based on predictive models that are built from historical students, predicting.. each student's risk, using all student data to form that predictive model. (Data Scientist, Institution C)*

## Example:

- *West et. al, (2016) – Australia and NZ academic experience.*

## 7. Collaboration to deliver support at point of need

*They came back to us and said you have all got a problem with referencing, you all need to redo your referencing for the next assessment which was another essay. They gave us no tutorial or anything.... (Online student)*

- Academic and support services working together.

*We have at least one Student Advisor in every School... the network functions across the whole university. (Student Advisor Coordinator, Institution P)*

- Embedding academic support within curriculum.

*So all our level one programs, basically the first two months of that is about learning how to learn and so, rather than it's over here, outside of the discipline base, it's actually embedded. (Teaching & Learning Manager, Institution B)*

- Including technology support.

*They need assistance in being able to navigate what to do in a unit, where you find information, what all this material's about, discussion forums, submitting assignments. (Deputy Head of School, Institution Q)*

### Example:

- Curriculum teams; OU (Slade & Prinsloo, 2015).

# Conclusion and guidelines for institutions

1. Know the students.
2. Demonstrate importance of online education through appropriate institutional resourcing .
3. Develop and implement institution-wide quality standards for teaching and delivery of online education .
4. Intervene early to address student expectations, build skills and engagement.
5. Explicitly value and support the vital role of ‘teacher-presence’.

# Conclusion and guidelines for institutions

6. Design for online.
7. Engage and support through content and delivery.
8. Build collaboration across campus to deliver holistic student support.
9. Contact and communicate throughout the student journey.
10. Make strategic use of learning analytics to target and personalise student interventions.

# Translating guidelines into action

- Institution-wide online learning strategy championed at the most senior levels.
- Demographic information about online student cohorts routinely made available to all involved staff - easily accessible and understandable.
- Appropriate resourcing for: realistic online class sizes and teaching hours; dedicated ongoing funding for support & retention programs; technology improvements, e.g. learning platforms, design, tools and data analytics.
- Online teaching and learning design standards ensure engagement, inclusion and accessibility for all students. Staff development.
- Early intervention, orientation and academic preparation for new & prospective students including face-to-face options, both on-campus and off-campus.
- Teamwork approach to student support. Academics and professional staff collaborate to embed support into the curriculum, including academic skills and technology support. Staff development.
- Online student intervention strategy; targeted & personalised messages; based on information from learning analytics, including predictive modelling.

# Discussion and questions

If you'd like to know more about this research,  
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Final Report due end of March

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