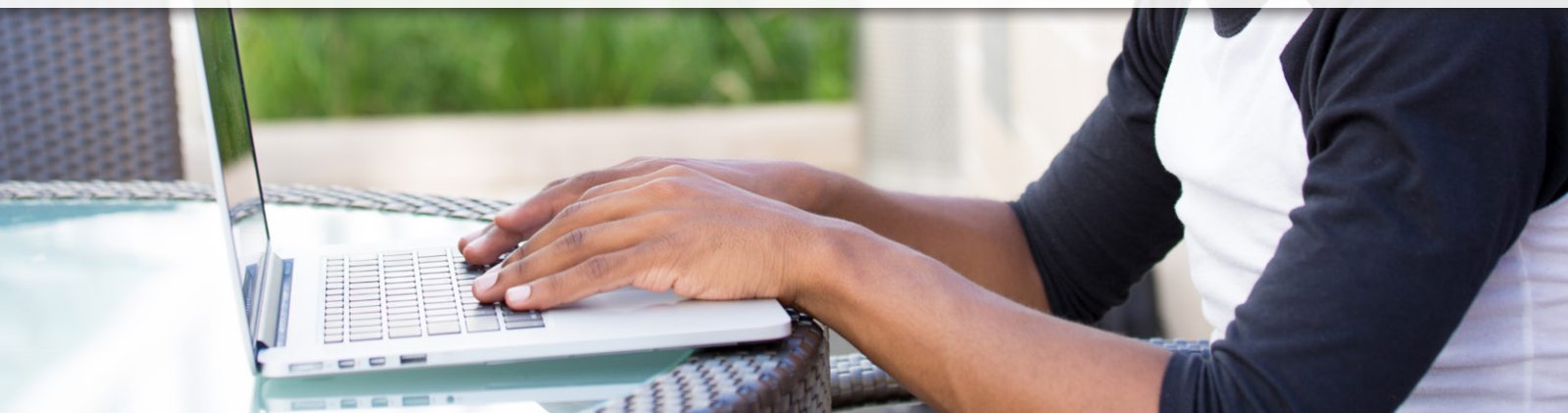


# Equity Fellow News

Project Update for February 2017  
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 February 2017. The Final Report has been drafted and is on schedule for completion by the end of **March 2017** as promised. Those who were participants in the project will be receiving a copy of the *Draft Final Report*, for comments and feedback prior to its finalisation and publication.

However, through this bulletin I would like to seek feedback more widely, from all those interested in the progress of this project, on the *Draft Guidelines for Improving Student Outcomes in Online Education* which are outlined below. The final guidelines will be included in the project's Final Report, as one of the major outcomes.

Thanks again for your continued interest and I look forward to receiving comments and feedback, which can be sent to me at [cathy.stone@newcastle.edu.au](mailto:cathy.stone@newcastle.edu.au)

The 10 guidelines that follow include examples of practical ways of translating these guidelines into action. At times these represent actual examples of practice in one or more of the participating institutions, while at other times they are composites of examples from institutions and/or literature.



**NCSEHE**

National Centre for Student  
Equity in Higher Education



**Curtin University**

# DRAFT GUIDELINES FOR IMPROVING STUDENT OUTCOMES IN ONLINE LEARNING

## 1. Know the students

Knowing the demographics of online students and gaining a better institutional understanding of the needs of this diverse cohort enables staff to interact with them from a better informed position. This understanding assists the development of appropriate support, teaching and communication strategies, including flexibility of approach to reduce barriers wherever possible.

### Translating into Action

An institution routinely makes available to all staff de-identified demographic information about specific student cohorts and the cohort as a whole; it also actively seeks student feedback about the online student experience. Demographic and survey reports are readily accessible via the learning platform dashboard and intranet. They are presented in ways that are easy to understand such as pie charts which can be further interrogated for more detailed information. Data and analytics staff are available for further advice and are allocated to work with specific areas of the university, such as faculties, schools, divisions and services, to encourage teamwork and collaboration on the planning of interventions and strategies for online students.

## 2. Demonstrate importance of online education through appropriate institutional resourcing

Online education must not be regarded as the 'cheaper option' for and by institutions. It needs to receive a level of priority and funding equitable with face-to-face programs and students; this must be clearly voiced and actioned at an institutional level.

### Translating into Action

An institution recognises that investment in engagement and support of online students leads to improved retention and completion. Online teaching is recognised appropriately in the academic workload model, through consultation with experienced academic staff to set benchmarks for realistic online class sizes and paid hours required for effective teaching and support. Programs that are shown through evaluation to improve online student engagement, satisfaction, retention and/or academic success, are provided with dedicated, ongoing funding, not dependent on year-to-year grants. Investment is made into technology improvements, including learning platforms, learning design, learning tools and data analytics, to deliver an engaging and positive online student experience.

## 3. Develop and implement institution-wide quality standards for teaching and delivery of online education

At an institutional level, quality standards for online teaching, learning design and student support need to be developed and clearly articulated; these standards must include staff development and training, to ensure the consistency of quality across all areas.

### Translating into Action

An institution-wide, senior-level approach is taken to the development of these standards, including close consultation with all relevant stakeholders within the institution, along with the use of research evidence (e.g. Parsell, 2014). At the most senior levels of the institution, a strategy leader or 'champion' is appointed to take responsibility for and to oversee the development, dissemination, implementation and continuous quality improvement of the standards, which are embedded within the institutional strategic plan.

## 4. Intervene early to address student expectations, build skills and engagement

Early contact and interventions with students, both pre- and post-enrolment, are crucial: to explore student expectations; provide a realistic picture of online study; facilitate appropriate academic preparation; improve early engagement; and build a sense of belonging to a learning community.

### Translating into Action

An institution informs and advises prospective students through clear information on its website, including:

- contact information for those wishing to speak with a prospective student advisor
- quizzes and games to help students understand what to expect of online learning
- 'readiness' questions to encourage adequate academic preparation.

Prospective student advisors are well-trained and knowledgeable about the demands and realities of online learning, including support available and how this can be accessed. Academic preparation is available online, free of charge, recommended via prospective student advisors and through the website, particularly to students new to university or to online study. The institution makes personal contact with new online students, via a range of media such as phone, email, messaging, to welcome and encourage participation in orientation activities, and to refer to help or support as required. Different approaches and touch points are utilised, such as; connecting new online students with those more experienced through peer mentoring programs; linking online students with a student advisor as their personal contact. Orientation activities for online students, both online and face-to-face, are offered at different times, using different technologies to enable the maximum number of students to participate. Outreach orientation activities are delivered off-campus at locations where distance students and their families are likely to be able to attend.

## 5. Explicitly value and support the vital role of 'teacher-presence'

Online teachers are absolutely crucial in building teacher-student and student-student relationships. A strong teacher-presence provides online students with a sense of belonging, helping them to feel connected to a community of learning and increasing their likelihood of persisting.

### Translating into Action

Within the institution's quality standards, as discussed in Guideline 3, the role of teacher-presence is explicitly recognised and valued. It is also included in institutional resource planning for online education, as discussed in Guideline 2. Online teachers are supported and resourced to create an obvious, supportive and encouraging presence within their online classroom. Sufficient teaching time and appropriate technology is allocated to enable them to: welcome students; be responsive on discussion boards; provide timely and detailed feedback; generate peer interaction; make use of learning tools; assist with problems; refer to the correct support; and, in general, provide an interactive learning experience that eases the isolation of online study and helps students feel connected with the teacher, their fellow students and with the class as whole.





## 6. Design for online

Education delivery must be designed specifically for online, using a diverse range of appropriate technologies to enhance learning outcomes.

### Translating into Action

The institution adheres to quality standards for online learning design, ensuring inclusivity and accessibility for all students. There is a consistent and intuitive structure to the learning platform across different faculties, schools and disciplines. Content is designed to encourage online engagement and interactivity, such as: purpose-made short videos with captions; tasks that encourage communication and collaboration; use of online tools to provide synchronous and asynchronous activities; information presented in multiple ways; and the ability for students to move at their own pace. A teamwork approach to design sees learning designers and academics working collaboratively to ensure compatibility and inclusivity of curriculum, content and delivery. Continuous improvement is emphasised, with quality reviews regularly conducted across all courses.

## 7. Engage and support through content and delivery

Learning content, teaching strategies and learning design must be interactive, connected, inclusive and relevant for online students; they need to be engaging and supportive, using a range of appropriate technologies that are specific to online delivery. Again, Parsell's Standards for Online Education (Parsell, 2014) offers a useful framework.

### Translating into Action

Engaging and supportive curriculum and teaching delivery are specifically included within the institution's quality standards for teaching and delivery of online education (See Guideline 3). Online teachers and curriculum developers receive ongoing and regularly updated training and staff development. Sessional staff receive paid training time and are required to attend. Online teaching staff are kept up-to-date with practical resources and guides (e.g. Verenikina, Jones, & Delahunty, 2017), incorporated in training. Online teachers engage and support students through: a variety of engaging and relevant content, activities and assessments; using a mixture of approaches and different technologies; timely, constructive and specific feedback; opportunity and encouragement for students to communicate and collaborate through discussion fora and collaborative tasks; and encouraging informal peer support opportunities through such means as social media.

## 8. Build collaboration across campus to offer holistic student support

Strong collaboration is required across the academic and professional areas of universities to provide holistic support to online students. Through this collaboration, it becomes possible to embed support within the curriculum, hence delivering it where and when it is most needed.

### Translating into Action

Academics and professional staff collaborate to embed support into the curriculum at point of need, including academic skills and technology support. Opportunities to practise academic skills are embedded within beginning units/modules; early assessment tasks are designed to assist students develop academic literacy skills and understand academic expectations. Additional optional online workshops and resources are available and encouraged. Student advisors, IT staff, learning skills staff and library staff are attached to schools and discipline areas, creating teams of academic and professional staff working together, within discipline or curriculum areas (Slade & Prinsloo, 2015) to provide teaching and support that is linked, relevant and provided at the point of need. The full suite of support services offered to on-campus students is also available and promoted to online students; in ways that can be accessed remotely through a variety of technologies including phone, email, messaging, live chat, synchronous and asynchronous audio and video. After-hours' and extended hours' support is available to students at times they are more likely to be studying.

## 9. Contact and communicate throughout the student journey

Across the wider institution, the establishment of regular contact points between students and the institution that reach out to students to provide information, offer support and increase engagement, have a demonstrated impact on retention and academic success of online students.

### Translating into Action

An institution has developed an online student intervention strategy, informed by learning analytics (See Finding 6) and developed and implemented collaboratively between academic, student support and data analysis staff. There is a recognition at senior executive levels of the importance of this strategy and it receives ongoing central funding. A comprehensive institutional framework of interventions has been developed, which includes personalised messages, through synchronous and asynchronous technologies (e.g. phone calls, messaging, emails) from both academic and professional staff, scheduled at particular times and targeted towards particular students or cohorts. Students are regularly and clearly advised about crucial dates and what these mean, including the last date for withdrawal from study before fees are due (census date). With the personalisation made possible through learning analytics, each student receives only those messages that are relevant for them. Messages are personalised based on a student's activity and behaviour, and tailored to their needs at particular points in time. This tells the student that the university knows who they are, is interested in them as an individual (See Finding 1) and is actively seeking to provide them with relevant and timely support.

## 10. Use learning analytics to target and personalise student interventions

Institutional data on online activity of students can be constructively harnessed to inform the development, personalising and appropriate targeting of interventions, to help students persist and succeed with their studies.

### Translating into Action

An institution uses data from its internal online systems to inform interventions based on student activity and behaviour. From this data, the institution builds a predictive model to target interventions towards those most likely to need them; also to personalise the interventions, including tailoring content and learning activities more specifically for individual students based on their learning engagement and achievements. A collaborative approach is taken towards the development of a learning analytics strategy, consulting widely with academic and support staff in deciding what to ask of the data and how to make the best use of the answers. Information, advice and support is made available to staff working with students across all areas of the university, in order to engage and involve them with the process (e.g. Slade & Prinsloo, 2015).

## References

- Parsell, M. (2014). *Standards for Online Education, Final Report*. Retrieved from <https://www.onlinestandards.net/>.
- Slade, S., & Prinsloo, P. (2015). *Stemming the flow: improving retention for distance learning students*. Paper presented at the EDEN 2015 Annual Conference. Retrieved from <http://oro.open.ac.uk/44537/>.
- Verenikina, I., Jones, P. T., & Delahunty, J. (2017). *The Guide to Fostering Asynchronous Online Discussion in Higher Education*. Retrieved from [www.fold.org.au/docs/TheGuide\\_Final.pdf](http://www.fold.org.au/docs/TheGuide_Final.pdf).