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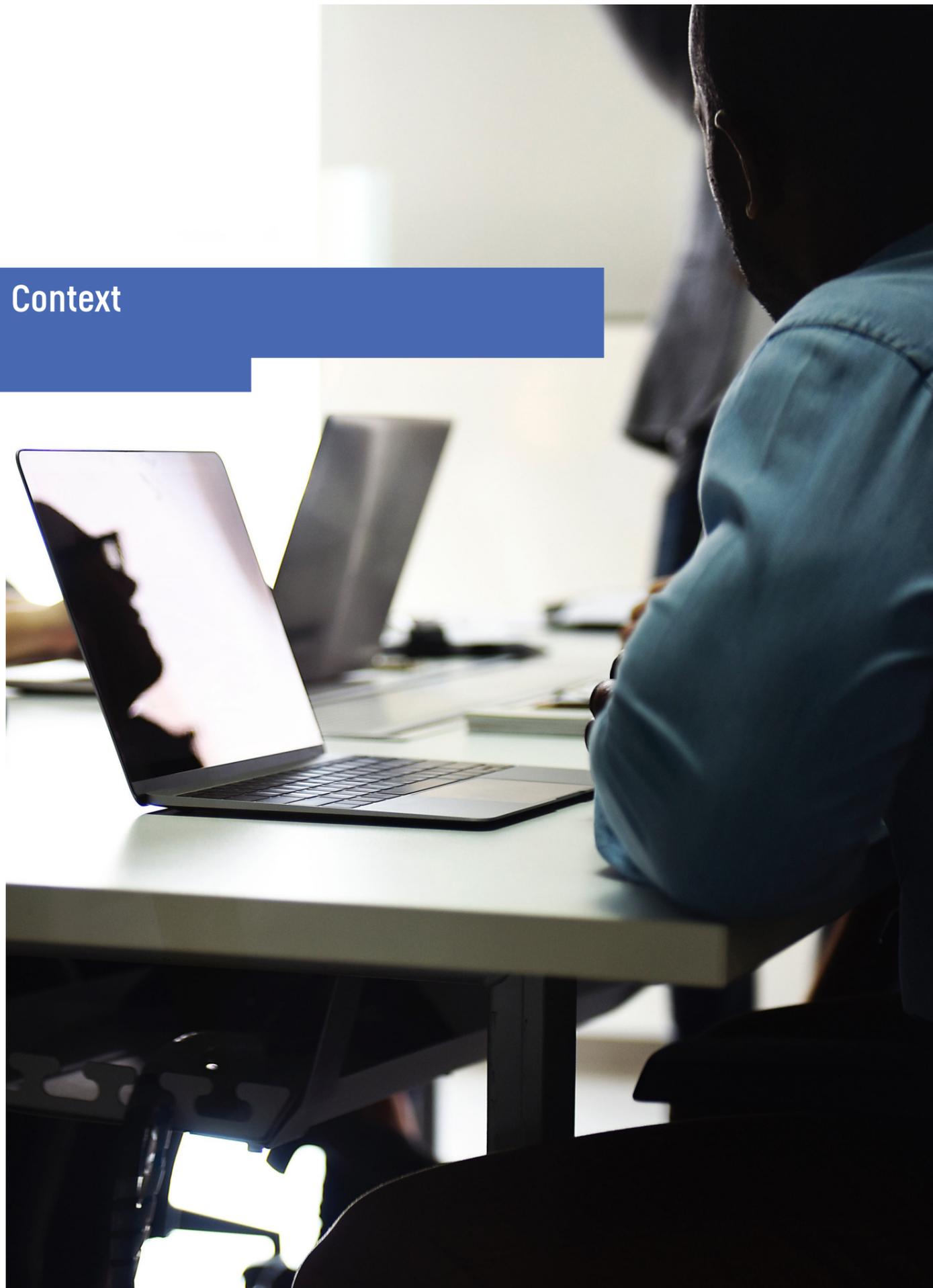


GOOD PRACTICE

In Online Teacher Education



Context



THE GROWTH IN ONLINE INITIAL TEACHER EDUCATION

Online learning is fast becoming the preferred mode of study for Initial Teacher Education (ITE) students in Australia. Between 2007 and 2016, the proportion of ITE students studying online has increased from 15% to 25% (Australian Institute of Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL), 2018a).

WHY THE GROWTH?

Online study offers accessibility and flexibility. It is particularly attractive for students who are older, with family commitments, work responsibilities, or those who live in remote settings (Stone, 2017).

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO STUDY ONLINE?

The age of digitalisation has seen a remarkable shift in the delivery of ITE programs. Where on-campus lectures and tutorials once characterised teacher education studies, today a range of study patterns are available for students: some students will study fully on-campus; others might complete their studies fully online and never set foot on a campus; others might do a mix of online and on-campus study that might vary by unit, semester, or year of study; and others might adopt a blended approach of listening to lectures online but attending on-campus tutorials. Whichever model students choose, the use of technology will be embedded into ITE program delivery in some way and the principles and checklist are relevant for all ITE students and teacher educators.

HOW DO ONLINE STUDENTS FARE?

THE GOOD NEWS: Research suggests that students who study teaching online can achieve similar academic results and are equally satisfied with their online studies as on-campus students. There is no evidence that mode of attendance negatively affects graduate quality (AITSL, 2018 a,b; Board of Studies Teaching and Educational Standards, 2014).

THE BAD NEWS: Students studying online have lower retention, success, and completion rates than their on-campus counterparts. Completion rates are even lower for online students who are studying from a remote location, younger than 19, have an Indigenous background, or have a disability (AISTL, 2018 a,b).

IS IT HARD TO TEACH TEACHING ONLINE?

For teacher educators, the transition to teaching online can be challenging for a number of reasons (Downing & Dymont, 2013). In a profession centred on relationships, trust, and support, the lack of face to face contact and opportunities to effectively model classroom teaching skills can threaten the traditional identity of a teacher educator. Teacher educators may experience technical challenges in designing, developing, and delivering online ITE, leading to dissatisfaction and concerns about the efficacy of online teacher education. They may struggle to adapt their pedagogies from classroom teaching into the online space.

WHO SHOULD READ THIS DOCUMENT?

This document responds to the growth in online ITE around Australia and the concerning statistics about lower retention, success, and completion rates of online ITE students. It is intended to be used by teacher educators working in the online space. It will also have relevance for educators working in other discipline areas in higher education who teach online.

WHERE DID THE PRINCIPLES AND CHECKLIST COME FROM?

The principles and checklist came from research conducted by teacher educators from the University of Tasmania over a number of years. We conducted a systematic literature review of research related to online ITE to understand baseline knowledge. We interviewed teacher educators around Australia who were leaders in online ITE. And, over a number of years, we have been tracking the experiences of students studying online to understand what engaged them in their online studies. For a list of some of our papers, please see the final page of this document.

Guidelines

1	Know your students.	Before and during the semester, be present and engaged. Respond positively to cohort diversity. Ensure you welcome students, introduce yourself, and encourage self-introductions from students.
2	Communicate and manage student expectations.	Help students understand and prepare for the expectations of the unit. Throughout the semester, stay abreast of emerging needs of the students and adjust practices accordingly.
3	Be present and involved.	Stay connected with and responsive to the students. Show care, understanding, and respect for the learning journey individually and collectively.
4	Create user friendly online learning spaces.	Ensure easy navigation, logical, and consistent flow and content access across the weeks.
5	Maximise the affordances of the online space.	Provide a variety and diversity of resources and activities each week and across the semester, through multi-media applications and tools.
6	Provide opportunities for students to develop relationships and contribute meaningfully to the online learning environment.	Provide learning opportunities through synchronous and asynchronous tools, such as purposeful discussion forums, interactive webinars, and collaborative applications. Appreciate that some tools will resonate more, less, or not at all with some students. Understand that some students will prefer to engage in their studies in private ways.
7	Design learning activities that encourage and allow students to engage in multiple ways.	Consider how students can engage in and beyond the online space: in their own workplace, community, or with student peers and colleagues. Recognise and trust that students will engage in learning activities in ways that may be public or private.
8	Build with flexibility in mind.	Respond to diverse students' needs through recognition that they will study in different times, places, and ways. Understand that students choose online for the flexibility to fit their studies around other pressing life responsibilities. Remember that learning and engagement happens in different ways for different people.
9	Ensure assessment tasks are authentic, applied, and constructively aligned with course aims and learning activities.	Create tasks that result in meaningful products, created over time, and with value beyond the course. Understand that well-designed assessment tasks should require and promote engagement across the semester.

10	Design to enable digital evidence of developing teacher capabilities (portfolio).	Consider how learning activities, assessment tasks, and practicums can facilitate digital capture of evidence supporting achievement of AITSL focus areas and classroom readiness.
11	Facilitate meaningful connections between university study and their professional contexts and experience.	Invite students to share their workplace experiences, relating their coursework to current workplace activities or school practice. Encourage critical engagement and reflection to link theory and practice.
12	Monitor and manage large online cohorts effectively.	Ensure tutors are active, supportive, and consistently engaged with their students, and modelling good practice in teaching.
13	Support students who are struggling or absent.	Be mindful of struggling or absent students and provide opportunities to support engagement. Ensure that clear information about institutional academic and personal support services is easily available and visible to students on the course pages they are routinely accessing. Mention these services from time to time, normalise them, and encourage their use. Students should understand these supports are there for all students – not just for those with problems. Help and support individual students to connect with such services as necessary.
14	Be prepared to change learning approaches and activities in response to changes in engagement levels during the semester.	Seek and respond to learner analytics and student or tutor feedback. Encourage and role model reflective practice.
15	Farewell students, review, reflect, and evaluate at the end of semester.	As the learning community you have helped to create comes to its conclusion, it is important to provide an opportunity for goodbyes and to wish each other well on the next stage of the journey. The next step is to ensure continual improvement. Update content and activities, keep teaching and learning fresh for teaching staff and students.

Checklist

PRE SEMESTER

- > Am I gathering information about the student cohort to know who my learners will be?
- > Am I sending a welcome email?
- > Do the students know who I am and a bit about my teaching philosophy?
- > Have I made the students aware of the expectations of the unit?
- > In my unit design, have I achieved constructive alignment among learning outcomes, learning activities, and assessment tasks?
- > Am I ready to launch my unit with the needs of non-traditional online learners in mind so they can progress flexibly at their own pace?

EARLY SEMESTER: WEEKS 1-3

- > What steps am I taking to get students to introduce themselves and get to know each other?
- > Have I responded to or acknowledged every student in early discussion posts?
- > Are my students aware of general trends in class demographics (e.g., numbers of students enrolled, backgrounds, diversity)?
- > Have I provided a forum for online students to form study groups or meet in person?
- > Am I responding in a timely and consistent manner to student emails and discussion posts with questions about the unit?
- > Have I set up systems to alert me to highly pressing and critically urgent discussion posts?
- > Have I made direct contact with students who have not yet engaged?

MID SEMESTER: WEEKS 4-10

- > How am I encouraging students to persist with their engagement?
- > How am I using learner analytics to monitor engagement and adjust my teaching practices accordingly?
- > How am I checking in with students whose engagement seems to have declined? Or those students who are not logging in?
- > How am I rewarding students who engage consistently?
- > How am I continuing to reach out to students to encourage their engagement?
- > How am I taking care to maintain my own enthusiasm and self-care?
- > How am I honouring and acknowledging the fact that student engagement may be focused on assessments during particular weeks, with less time for engagement in other ways?
- > How am I ensuring I am giving students prompt constructive feedback on their work? And how can I confirm they are engaging with the feedback?
- > Have I explained if I will be less present for a period (due to, for example, a conference)?
- > How am I using technological affordances to maintain a presence even when I might be away?
- > Have I invited feedback on unit design and adjusted practices accordingly?
- > How have I diversified my pedagogies and learning practices so there is variety within and across weeks?
- > How have I confirmed that my learning activities support becoming a teacher?
- > How have I allowed students time to engage with their assessment tasks?
- > Have I provided opportunity for a synchronous hook up with students?
- > Have I offered timely and comprehensive feedback on assessment tasks?
- > Am I ensuring that my tutors are meaningfully engaged?

LATE SEMESTER: WEEKS 11-13

- > How am I ensuring I maintain my presence and activity and continuing to support student engagement?
- > How am I ensuring I support my students to take more responsibility for their learning and allow communities of practice to emerge?
- > How am I ensuring my learning activities sustain student engagement until assignment and semester completion?
- > How am I farewelling my students and offering closure on the unit?
- > How am I taking time to record problems and successes that arose this semester so I can adjust for the next offering?



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MORE RESEARCH BY THE TEAM

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We acknowledge the teacher educators and students who participated in all phases of our research. We are grateful for the financial support from the following grants: University of Tasmania (UTAS) Nationally Significant Teaching Development Grant; UTAS College of Arts, Law and Education Hothouse Grant; UTAS College of Arts, Law, and Education Conference and Symposium Seed Funding; and, UTAS School of Education Research Enhancement Research Scheme.

