

## **Quest for Student Success: A Cross-disciplinary Exploration of the Learning and Development Needs of Online Students in a Regional University**

A Presentation for the AALL conference, 2017 by Douglas Eacersall (University of Southern Queensland) and Amelia Dowe (University of Southern Queensland).

### **Abstract:**

There has been an increasing emphasis on the importance of the online environment across many higher education institutions. This means that identifying the language and learning development needs of online students and how they might be best engaged is a necessary step in enhancing student success and extending the teaching and learning opportunities for staff and students. It is also important that the provision of online support to online students is evidence based. This paper reports on the preliminary findings of a mixed-method research project that sought to identify across disciplines the language and learning development needs of online students within the context of a regional university.

Previous studies demonstrate that there are many factors affecting student online learning. For example, emotions, such as enjoyment, interest, boredom and frustration are important (Kahu, Stephens, Leach & Zepke, 2015). Feelings of connectedness with instructors and peers (Delahunty, Verenikina & Jones, 2014) and the relationship between peer-to-peer interaction and online student retention (Boyle, Kwon, Ross & Simpson, 2010) are also important factors. Other studies have demonstrated that the opportunity for interaction in learning activities (Kuo, Walker, Schroder & Belland, 2014) and the positive effects of interaction in online courses (Croxtton, 2014; Barberà, Layne & Gunawardena, 2014) are significant. These studies have been influential in informing the findings discussed in this paper but their focus is mainly curriculum based rather than co-curricular initiatives.

Several co-curricular online resources aimed at developing academic skills have been evaluated and reported on in recent years (Mort, 2012; Nallaya & Kehrwald, 2013). These studies are instructive in communicating good practice in the field and providing an insight into their development. There are several areas, however, that these studies do not address. For example, there is limited investigation of students' learning and development needs or means of addressing emotional engagement in the context of these particular institutions. Although each of the programs is thoroughly informed by evidence and current research, the needs of the student cohort have not been reported on in the development stages. Further, student-instructor interaction tends to have been neglected in favour of student-content interaction.

This paper begins to address these issues by reporting on the findings of a project that investigated the learning and development needs of online students from a co-curricular perspective whilst also taking into account significant online learning factors, such as emotional engagement and different types of student interaction. The paper will also discuss the ways in which these findings inform the development of online resources and effective engagement of online students within the context of learning support.

Keywords: Technology Enhanced Learning; student experience; student success; Higher Degree by Research (HDR); Postgraduate Research

## Introduction

This paper seeks to outline a proposed research project examining student success and the academic skill development needs of students within the context of a restructure at a regional university. The paper highlights the background, aims, research questions and methodology, as well as examines how the literature can inform the study and give some indication of what we expect to find. The research pursues simple yet fundamental questions within the context of student learning and development support in a discipline based matrix model – How do

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students and academics define student success? What are the perceived student learning and development needs to achieve student success? And, how best might these needs be met?

Given the prevalence of the online provision of learning across institutions and that 70% of the student cohort at this institution are online the paper has a particular focus on online learning and how these needs might be provided for in the online space.

### Background to the study

The Scholarly Information and Learning Services area of the University of Southern Queensland recently underwent a restructure that involved the previous Learning and Teaching Support Unit moving into the organisational structure of the library and becoming Student Learning and Development (SLD). This newly formed section is made up of discipline-specific Learning Advisors responsible for providing academic support to students in the areas of language and maths. The role of advisors is to provide students with generic skills and graduate attributes to meet their learning and development needs. Within the new structure this is achieved in two ways. The first is directly with students through one-on-one consultations, workshops and the provision of online resources via SLD's website. The second involves working with faculty academics to ensure that generic skills and graduate attributes important for student success are being delivered within courses.

The new structure is arranged according to a matrix model of service that involves horizontal and vertical teams. This means that discipline specific Learning Advisors form a horizontal team as SLD but are also part of vertical teams arranged according to their discipline. Each vertical discipline team includes members from the various other horizontal teams within the division, so for example the Sciences and Health vertical team includes the Sciences and Health Learning Advisor, the Sciences and Health Educational Designer and the Sciences and Health Liaison Librarian. A vertical discipline team comes together to develop strategic

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initiatives or to address a particular need from faculty academics within that discipline. There are five discipline specific groupings within the new structure, Education; Health and Sciences; Engineering, Built Environment and IT, Arts, and Business and Law. There are also maths learning advisors, a peer-learning coordinator and a Higher Degree by Research learning advisor that operate across all disciplines.

The majority of learning advisors in the old Learning and Teaching Support Unit model were contracted in short-term positions supporting students across all disciplines. The approach focused on a limited number of students self-identifying a need for support and that need being addressed one student at a time across generalist advisors. The new model provides opportunities for more proactive engagement and a means to consider student success and student learning and development needs more strategically. The pivotal questions within this landscape are: What is student success? Are students' needs being met to achieve success? How might these needs best be met within the new structure?

#### Aims and focus

Within the context of tertiary education, student development needs encompass many different components of identity theory including social identity theory “for example race, ethnicity, sexual identity, gender, religion, ability and social class, psychosocial identity development, cognitive/epistemological development, moral development, and holistic self-authorship” (Patton et al., 2016, p. 17). Within the literature, this is an extensive field. In this area, the research seeks to examine student success as defined by students and faculty academics and the skills and generic attributes they need to achieve this. The research seeks to focus on academic skills and generic attributes associated development rather than the full field of student development.

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The aim of this research is to better understand the learning and development needs of students within the context of a new operating structure and begin to use this information to inform practice.

#### Research questions

- How do students and academics in the faculty define student success?
- Is the emphasis on passing and achieving higher grades, self-development and lifelong learning goals, future career prospects or is it a combination of these?
- What are the perceived learning and development needs for student success?
- How might we best address the learning and development needs of students in order to assist them to achieve success?
- What role might technology play in addressing these needs?

#### Methodology

The proposed research seeks to further understand the learning and development needs of students by collecting data from several sources. External and internal environmental scans will be carried out in order to benchmark current practice against other institutions, the literature will be reviewed, and quantitative and qualitative research will be conducted with both students and faculty academics using a mixed method approach. It is proposed that the analysis of this information will assist in understanding the learning and development needs for student success and how to best meet those needs.

Schlossberg (1989) described transition as a process over time involving three distinct phases - moving in, moving through, and moving out. This research takes a broad approach but seeks to be representative of the entire university and provide the opportunity for comparative analysis of student needs and perspectives between disciplines, cohorts and students in

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different phases. This approach will be useful in analysing different needs and perspectives across the institution. Still able to focus on moving in, moving through, moving out, and on specific disciplines.

The literature

A review of the literature can inform the study in a number of areas and provide an indication of the types of things we expect to find, as well as areas in the field where this research may be able to make a contribution. The literature in the areas of student success, learning and development needs and online learning is extensive. Given that 70% of the student cohort is online and the remaining 30% of on-campus students also participate in some form of online learning part of the research and the remaining aspects of this paper will focus on student learning and development needs for student success within the online environment. And, from a digitalising AALL practices perspective.

Online learning and technology enhanced learning have become increasingly prevalent throughout the last two decades. Indeed, as Henderson (2015, p. 316) has pointed out “learning management systems, library websites and databases, and Internet searching are now all integral to contemporary undergraduate studies. It is now difficult to imagine being a university student without these technologies.”

The use of online technologies has the potential to provide benefits to university students on a number of levels. In their review of the literature covering technology enhanced learning and teaching in higher education Kirkwood and Price (2014) discussed three main areas of benefit or enhancement that studies focused on. These were operational improvement, in that online technologies could provide greater flexibility and access to resources; quantitative benefits in terms of improved engagement, increased time spent on task, improved grades on assessment

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items; and qualitative advantages such as, reflection on learning and deeper understanding.

More specifically Henderson et al. (2015) described the ways in which undergraduate students make use of online lecture recordings and engage with learning and teaching materials in video form including using YouTube to complement existing course materials.

Academic language and learning practices also demonstrate the prevalence of these technologies and their potential benefits. For example Kirkwood (2012) discussed the SNAP.VU site which sought to use technologies for the development of academic skills through online peer-to-peer learning. Leslie-McCarthy and Tutty (2011) outlined the strategies for effective ALL websites. Wingate and Dreiss (2009) described an embedded discipline-specific online approach for developing student academic literacy. Beaumont (2011) explained the success of using Electronic Just-in-Time sessions. The benefits of online grammar checking tools were outlined by Cavaleri and Dianati (2016). Dashwood and Son (2017) analysed the benefits of embedded online modules to support academic language for at-risk students.

Although online learning has benefits there are also a number of issues to consider in using these technologies to effectively address student needs. These issues involve staff and student concerns, institutional variables and pedagogical considerations.

Students and staff

Desire and ability (staff and student)

For various reasons students and staff may not be willing or able to ‘embrace’ the new technology (Kirkwood, 2012).

Students

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In terms of students there may be issues with digital literacy or fluency. Students are not necessarily the digital natives they are sometimes made out to be – rather than power users the majority of students might be more accurately described as ordinary or basic users (Henderson et al., 2015). There may be a misalignment between the skills students should have for success in online courses and the skills students claim they actually have (Levy & Ramim, 2017). Students can experience issues with cultural and language background (Luyt, 2013), technical skills (Peng, Tsai, & Wu, 2006), and attitudes towards online technology (Tsai & Lin, 2004).

#### Staff/instructors

From the perspective of instructors their role in the development of content and the ways in which the implementation of technology is carried out is fundamental. For example as Leslie-McCarthy and Tutty (2011) pointed out lack of technical expertise for the adequate development of website resources can be an issue.

#### Institution

Development of online resources can be costly and time consuming (Leslie-McCarthy & Tutty, 2011). In order to adequately meet the needs of learners, institutional support in terms of appropriate resourcing for development and technical support for students with ICT issues is fundamental (Concannon, Flynn, & Campbell, 2005).

#### Pedagogical considerations

There are a number of pedagogical issues to consider when addressing the learning needs of students online. In online discussions, it is important to have an understanding that online learning interaction includes listening and observing as well as actively contributing

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(Hrastinski, 2009). The ways in which text is integrated with video and audio is also important (Kebritchi et al., 2017).

Student awareness and the ability to locate online resources is fundamental (Concannon et al., 2005). The effectiveness in meeting student need is diminished if good resources are hidden and difficult to find. Regarding websites - students want quick answers rather than complete advice – The design and pedagogical approach “needs to convince students that the engagement and time invested [in online interactions] are worthwhile” (Leslie-McCarthy & Tutty, 2011, p. 29).

The potential of technology...

In identifying and addressing the needs of students online we need to be careful that technology doesn't lead the way and ensure consideration is given to “identified educational need or aspiration” and an “explicit educational rationale” for technological innovations (Kirkwood & Price, 2014, pp. 25, 26). This means that initiatives should not just be technology for technology's sake or simply just reproducing the same learning experiences but in a different medium. There is nothing wrong with this type of initiative and in fact they can often be fundamental in providing for the needs of online students but there is also a need to fully explore the potential of technology and new ways of interaction that not only reproduce the learning and teaching experience but also enhance and transform it. Although it is necessary to heed the warnings of commentators such as Selwyn (2016) in articles like ‘Minding our language: Why education and technology is full of bullshit and what might be done about it’ and to recognise the rhetoric that surrounds technology the potential of technology to enhance and transform teaching and learning experiences is still something that warrants careful consideration.

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As Kirkwood and Price (2014, p. 26) have stated “transforming learning is a complex activity that frequently necessitates reconsideration by teachers of what constitutes ‘teaching’ and ‘learning’”. It requires sophisticated reasoning about the goals of any intervention, the design of the evaluation and the interpretation of the results within the particular educational context.” They go on to declare that “Further research needs to examine the relationship between these factors and their bearing on the potential of technology to transform the student learning experience” (Kirkwood & Price, 2014, p. 26).

### Student learning support

So what does this all mean for learning support and student needs within the context of the University of Southern Queensland?

As students interact more online using technology in courses there is a growing necessity to meet student needs and provide support in these areas. Student learning support also use online platforms to engage with students and so it is also necessary to consider how these might best serve students and support their skill development needs.

### Digital literacy and fluency

Given that students are generally not the digital natives they are made out to be and the importance that students are adequately supported in the use of online technologies there is a role for student learning support to assist students in the development of digital literacy and fluency capabilities. What might this entail?

### Learning support resources

In the development of online learning support resources, in online interactions and in collaborations with faculty academics to embed resources within courses it is necessary for

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ALL practitioners to consider the issues discussed above and how student needs might best be met in the online environment. This involves a balance of operational improvements and more complex enhancements. Current resources can be enhanced for ease of access by reproducing them online but there is also a need to begin to consider how technology can further enhance student experience and learning in the more qualitative areas, such as reflection on learning and deeper understanding and how technology might be used to transform ways of learning and teaching...

This approach raises a number of questions. How should it be done? How might it best be achieved? Will it meet the perceived needs and expectations of students? Does it align with approaches and current practice in the faculty? Are faculty academics willing to work on embedding activities that will assist in developing these types of skills? Are there special considerations to be made for international students, first year students, undergrad students, Higher Degree by Research students? Can generic resources be developed or are discipline specific resources required? Is it necessary to go as far as transforming ways of teaching and learning? Is this practical or even possible? Through consulting students and academics and conducting further research into the literature - these are just some of the questions this proposed research project hopes to investigate in order to more fully understand the needs of students at the university and how those needs might best be met.

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