

Three Essentials of moving online

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Online students have traditionally been :

- Older
- Female
- First in their families/amongst their friends, to go to university
- Working in part-time or full-time employment
- Studying part-time
- Time-poor, with multiple other commitments e.g. home/work/family
- Unable to travel the distance to study on-campus, or to afford the time/money involved

But now we are potentially talking about *all* students....

What do online students say they want and need?

To feel included and valued:

- *...a lower priority than on-campus students... second fiddle... not really having a voice...*

Preparation:

- *I just felt uni didn't give me that hook to start; you kind of drowned. We need inductions and orientations on how to use stuff.*

To be responded to:

- *self-service units... disappearing lecturer... little or no feedback... no discussion... 'don't bother me' tutors...*

Flexibility:

- *the whole point of being online is, I would have thought, for flexibility, and to then encompass a much broader range of learners in different circumstances*

Sources: O'Shea et al., 2015; Stone et al., 2016; Stone & O'Shea, 2019 ; Stone, Freeman et al., 2019

What do online students say they want and need?

Connection:

- *I guess not having that relationship with people... it would be nice for them [teachers and other staff] to more connect with us students.*

Personal contact:

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

Proactive institutional support:

- *They came back to us and said, 'you all need to redo your referencing for the next assessment', which was another essay. They gave us no tutorial or anything.*

Well designed materials:

- *...what works in person is not the same as online... I thought it would be more tailor-made for it than what it is.*

Sources: O'Shea et al., 2015; Stone et al., 2016; Stone & O'Shea, 2019

Hearing from those who teach & support online students

2016 Equity Fellowship research

National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education

Seek combined wisdom of higher education practitioners on *what is most important* to help online students stay & succeed

Investigate engagement, teaching and support strategies for domestic u/g online students

National Guidelines for improving student outcomes in online learning
(March 2017)

Seeking the wisdom and experience of educators and practitioners

- 151 staff interviewed (involved in online education, teaching, delivery & support); academic, professional, managerial staff
- 16 higher education institutions (15 in Australia & The Open University, UK)
- What interventions/strategies for online students were they using, to improve retention, academic success?
- Were any of these being measured/evaluated? In what ways? Any results?
- What else is important for institutions to do, in relation to online students, to help them stay and succeed?

16 Institutions involved			
1	Charles Darwin University Metropolitan & remote NT	9	The Open University UK Externally across whole of UK (and internationally)
2	Charles Sturt University Regional NSW	10	RMIT University Metropolitan Victoria
3	Curtin University Metropolitan WA	11	Southern Cross University Regional Queensland
4	Flinders University Metropolitan SA	12	Swinburne University Metropolitan Victoria
5	La Trobe University Metropolitan Victoria	13	University of Newcastle Regional NSW
6	Macquarie University Metropolitan NSW	14	University of New England Regional NSW
7	Murdoch University Metropolitan WA	15	University of Southern Queensland Regional Queensland
8	Open Universities Australia (in partnership with 13 Australian universities)	16	University of Tasmania Metropolitan, regional & remote TAS

7 Key Findings

1. Strategic whole -of-institution approach

- ▶ Online education needs to be recognised as core business – not an after-thought:
It's not secondary education, and, you know, until the whole university thinks like that and it's core business, then we're always pushing things (online programs coordinator).
...the poor cousin (unit coordinator)...a second-class academic...(casual lecturer)
- ▶ 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)
- ▶ Understand who the students are – appreciate their strengths and their challenges:
They're really conscientious students (senior lecturer)... busy lives, lots of balls in the air (course coordinator)... difficulty often with internet access (student advisor)

2. Intervene early, to connect and prepare

- Tell prospective students what to expect:

I think we need to be a bit more realistic... it's harder doing it online ... we need to set up realistic expectations (Project Coordinator)

- Provide early personal contact:

...scaffolded entry into the online environment (senior lecturer)...greater emphasis at the front end (senior manager, student services) ...welcome campaign, dialling out, having a conversation (student support manager)

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

We literally jump in our cars and go and visit students (student engagement director)

- Facilitate academic preparation:

to get them to a place where they're comfortable with being in an academic environment (course coordinator)

3. The vital role of ‘teacher -presence’

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

someone on the other end of the system listening to them... communication and feedback... you can't communicate enough with online students (lecturer)

when there's no responses to emails and discussion forums, the attrition rate's higher and the students are really unhappy (unit coordinator)

- ▶ A demanding role:

The instructor is everything to the students (course coordinator)

Engagement demands are completely different, reliance on the instructor much more intensive – basically you're it (course coordinator)

It's very time-consuming; tutors aren't always paid for that amount of time... we're not supposed to spend a lot of time on it; you're always chasing your tail because there's not enough time (lecturer)

Source: Stone, 2017; Stone & Springer, 2019

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4. Design for Online – content & delivery

- Design completely differently

...thinking about distance learning or online learning as a different animal to the face-to-face course... it needs to be designed completely differently (lecturer)

- Engage and support through content and delivery

...allowing opportunities for students to engage with the content online, teacher- presence, responding to questions and comments (online curriculum manager)

- Strengthen interaction amongst students

discussion is the centrepiece of the classroom experience (course convenor)

you can replicate peer support in an online environment (teaching & learning manager)

5. Contact and connect along the student journey

- Reaching out to students proactively;

...when we think they may be sort of falling by the wayside, having some difficulties (student services manager)

Don't wait for them to approach you, just say 'how's it going? Is there a problem?' (lecturer)

- through a coordinated approach;

Difficult for academic staff to deal with the sheer volume... [need for] a communication strategy [with] touch points along the first semester... link off to other support systems (senior manager)

- making a difference:

I've been able to get my non-completer rate right down... 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)

Sources: Stone 2017; Stone, Hewitt & Morelli, 2013

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6. Role of Learning Analytics

- Personalise interventions; even curriculum:

they expect to be remembered... and analytics and other tools help academics and teachers keep up with that (learning technology manager)

- Predict who may need extra help/support:

...bringing the data together and, based on predictive models, predicting.. each student's risk, using all student data to form that predictive model (data scientist)

- Inform student interventions:

we push student data through, we take about 200 students a day and contact them (support services director)

7. Collaboration to deliver support at point of need

- ▶ Academic and professional staff working together, to embed support within curriculum:

...joined up academic and non-academic support for students in a holistic way (senior manager)

if their referencing's not great, okay, we'll get one of my team in, we'll create some sort of online resource to embed (library manager)

- ▶ Ensuring equitable access:

out-of-hours [support] for online students... most things still nine to five (program manager)

we need to be making sure that we have a kind of online version of what we have on campus (equity officer)

10 National Guidelines for Institutions

1. Know who the students are – make sure the external, online cohort is *well understood* across the institution
2. Develop, implement & regularly review *institution-wide quality standards* for online education (continuous quality improvement)
3. Intervene early to address student expectations, build skills and engagement – *contact, connect, prepare*
4. Explicitly *value and support* the vital role of ‘teacher-presence’ – e.g. training, resourcing, realistic class sizes and allocated teaching time
5. *Design for online* – ‘online first’, inclusive, accessible
6. *Engage and support* through curriculum, content and delivery – institutional quality standards

10 National Guidelines for Institutions

7. Build collaboration across campus to deliver *holistic student support* – integrated, embedded in curriculum
8. Contact and communicate *throughout the student journey* – institutional framework of interventions
9. Make strategic use of learning analytics to inform intervention strategy - *target and personalise student interventions*, including personalising curriculum
10. Invest in online education through sufficient resources – *core business funded appropriately*

(See ‘more ideas’ in [guidelines document](#) for examples of good practice)

To move quickly online, let's boil these down to three essentials:

1. Recognise the *diversity* of students' strengths, needs and circumstances: (Guidelines 1,2)
 - Not everyone has fast internet and up to date computers – nor will everyone be very tech-savvy
 - All ages and stages - *flexibility* will be needed as students 'fit study in' around their other commitments & responsibilities; weekends are essential & extensions may be needed
 - Not all will be able to attend synchronous sessions – need a good mix of synchronous and asynchronous contact
2. Online students need a strong *teacher-presence* and *ongoing communication*: (Guidelines 3,4,7,8,9)
 - Regular and meaningful communication with teachers – discussion boards, emails, blogs etc. – or students quickly become disengaged and disillusioned
 - Institutional contact & communication throughout the student journey – enrolment to graduation
3. Interactive and engaging course design: (Guidelines 5,6) e.g.
 - Short videos, varied tasks, student-to-student communication

Adequate resourcing is needed for all the above to occur (Guideline 10)

Teacher-presence

A few tips

- Create a short introductory video – not too fancy, just do it on your phone – so they can see you and hear you.
- Encourage them to do the same and share it with the class – or to write something if they can't upload etc. Everyone – including you! - finds out who is in the class, and a little about them.
- Find the best way for you to be consistent in your communication with the class – how & when you will respond to posts, provide comments, offer encouragement, suggestions, feedback etc. Give clear information about when and how you will be doing this, and when and how they can contact you.
- Set expectations (yours and students') clearly & positively – and keep your side of the bargain!
- The more you engage with them, the more they will engage with you and the class as a whole

Engaging & interactive course design

- Build interactivity into learning tasks wherever you can
- Contribute to discussion and ask open and relevant questions to encourage their input
- Respond!
- Use short videos wherever possible rather than long recordings of full lectures. Keep it short and to the point.
- Vary the tasks – break it up, mix it up.
- Offer a mix of synchronous and asynchronous – recognising that synchronous activities may not be well attended, but are valuable for those do attend.

References

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