



Creating socially inclusive online learning environments in higher education

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The expansion of higher education across the broader Australian population has led to a more diverse student population than ever before. While research in the Australian context has focussed on support for some traditionally underrepresented students in a face-to-face learning context, how to enhance participation and success of these groups in online education has remained relatively unexplored. This paper presents the rationale and approach of a study investigating the challenges of students from traditionally underrepresented groups in online higher education (i.e. low SES, first in family, indigenous, disability, mature age, primary caregivers, remote and regional students, international, English as a second language), and approaches that can enhance the learning experience for these students. As a work in progress the research will draw on student and staff perspectives to develop and disseminate principles and practices for effective, socially inclusive online teaching.

Keywords: Online Education; Inclusive teaching; Social Inclusion; Non-traditional students

Research context

Within the Australian higher education environment two broad trends can be observed: the expansion of access to higher education across the population (e.g. Australian Government, 2013; Newnham, Anderson, & James, 2012), and the online delivery of courses as an alternative or a compliment to face-to-face offerings (e.g. Palmer & Holt, 2009). While a strong body of knowledge exists in effective online learning practices (e.g. Krause, 2011), much of the literature assumes that these principles apply equally to the diverse groups that make up an increasing part of the student body. Building on research into effective teaching of students from low socio-economic backgrounds in Australian higher education (Devlin, Kift, Nelson, Smith, & McKay, 2012), this research aims to explore effective teaching practices in the online space among a broader set of equity groups (i.e. low SES, first in family, indigenous, disability, mature age, primary caregivers, remote and regional students, international, English as a second language). It aims to develop an understanding of the present context relating to diversity and online learning and inform practices to further enhance practice in this area.

This paper describes a study that seeks to understand the barriers faced by non-traditional students when learning in the online context, and online teaching strategies that address the needs of a variety of traditionally underrepresented groups. Acknowledging the socio-cultural incongruence (Devlin, 2013) between university culture and the backgrounds of non-traditional students suggests there needs to be efforts to bridge this divide through inclusive teaching practices. The researchers seek to develop an evidence base of practices and principles for the design and delivery of socially inclusive online teaching to enable participation and success for all students regardless of social, cultural, economic or physical barriers. By exploring and sharing inclusive

online teaching practices the research aims to support the aspirations of equity groups who can significantly benefit from educational technology.

Increasing online delivery of higher education

The trend towards increased online education in Australia can in part be attributed to government support for regional universities becoming distance education centres (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2010). Support for the development of technology and expertise in online education has since been expanded across all Australian universities with encouragement for collaboration and funding to increase online teaching capacity (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2010). Most recent statistics suggest that external and mixed-mode students represent around 20.9% of the Australian higher education market, which has been gradually increasing over time (Australian Government, 2013).

Opportunity for people to participate in online education has increased beyond single institution initiatives. Open Universities Australia represents a consortium of universities with a set of shared online offerings recognised as equivalent to on-campus units. These current trends have provided greater flexibility in access to higher education for people in situations where they would have previously not had the opportunity.

Expanding access to higher education

Attention to issues of access to higher education have been heightened since the *Review of Australian Higher Education* (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent & Scales, 2008). This has led to government commitments to expanding access to higher education (Australian Government, 2009), which have gradually increased the number of students from traditionally underrepresented backgrounds attending Australian universities, although only slightly increasing the proportions (Australian Government, 2013; Newnham, Anderson, & James, 2012). Naylor, Baik, and James (2013) suggest that the most significant factors affecting equity group participation in higher education since the Bradley review include: the uncapping of undergraduate places, the establishment of a national target for low SES participation; funding to institutions for equity initiatives; and changes in community beliefs about the value of higher education and its accessibility. Statistics from the first year of uncapped university places brought about by the *Higher Education Support Amendment (Demand Driven Funding System and Other Measures) Bill* (2011) suggest that in 2012 compared to 2011 commencements by:

- low socio-economic students increased by 10.4% (based on SA1 data from the 2011 SEIFA Education and Occupation index);
- regional students increased by 6.4%;
- remote students increased by 7.0%;
- indigenous students increased by 8.4%;
- domestic students from a non-English speaking background increased by 13.7%;
- students with a disability increased by 15.5% (Australian Government, 2013).

Along with these equity groups Morgan (2013) also suggests that first in family and mature aged students may face challenges in the higher education environment. Parents or primary caregivers also face considerable challenges in undertaking studies (Wainwright & Marandet, 2010). Also while the number of international students commencing in 2012 decreased (-2.7%), this group still represents a substantial proportion of the Australian undergraduate student body (27.3%) (Australian Government, 2013), who face distinct challenges in undertaking higher education (e.g. Johnson & Kumar, 2010).

Providing access is only the first step to increasing opportunity for non-traditional students. The educational aspirations of these equity groups must be supported in the design and delivery of an inclusive learning environment (Tinto, 2012). The challenges for traditionally underrepresented groups in higher education have been explored in terms of face-to-face delivery (e.g. Abbott-Chapman, 2011; Devlin, Kift, Nelson, Smith, & McKay, 2012; Morgan, 2013), however there is limited research on the experience of online higher education for these groups and strategies that may enable and enhance their participation. This research aims to address this gap through an investigation of the practices and principles of effective socially inclusive online teaching.

Research Approach

This research is underpinned by Devlin's (2013) concept of 'socio-cultural incongruence', which highlights the challenges for traditionally underrepresented students to work within the values and practices of institutions that

have traditionally catered to privileged groups. This conceptual framework sets the challenge for institutions to bridge socio-cultural incongruence by re-examining their practices in the light of a diverse student body.

This research asks the questions (a) what challenges exist for students from equity groups engaging in online learning? and, (b) what strategies support learning for students from equity groups in the online environment? The study proposes to understand the student perspective on what aspects of online learning positively impacted on their learning experience and promoted participation and success in learning. This understanding will also be supported by exploring the perspective of teaching staff in supporting students from non-traditional backgrounds in online higher education. The researchers are seeking to initiate a national, cross-institutional exploration for this study so that the findings will be generalisable across different cohorts of equity groups, academic disciplines, and Australian jurisdictions. The proposal is for an exploratory sequential mixed-methods enquiry that allows the researchers to investigate qualitative data with a smaller number of participants in the first instance, then use the findings to design a second quantitative phase across a larger population (Creswell, 2014). The two phases of this research are outlined here:

Phase 1:

Interviews and focus groups will be conducted with students and teachers involved in studying or teaching online or in a blended learning environment. Participants will include (a) students from non-traditional backgrounds who have studied online or in a blended learning environment to explore the barriers to learning with technology, and practices that support learning in the online context (n=100); and (b) staff in Australian universities who teach in courses with an online component (n=50). It will be important to ensure that student participants are from a range of backgrounds (i.e. low socio-economic backgrounds, first in family, disability, indigenous, remote and regional, international, English as a second language). Also important is that student and academic participants represent a range of discipline areas, and regions throughout Australia to ensure the research has relevance to the broader Australian higher education context. Universities with a high proportion of equity student groups will be of particular interest, drawing on existing equity data. Students will be recruited through a strategy of general advertisements identifying the groups we are most interested in interviewing. Staff participants will be identified by Associate Deans of Teaching and Learning (or equivalent) as demonstrating inclusive online teaching at participating schools/faculties.

Focus groups will be conducted to facilitate critical discussion and exchange about online teaching practices and experiences of online education amongst a group of experts (Gibbs, 2012). Complimenting the audio recording of focus groups will be the use of the ZING software, which enables participants to contribute through typing out their ideas, which is projected so it can add to the focus group discussion. ZING helps to add depth to focus group discussions by making extra information available, and engaging participants in analysing data as it is being collected (Moyle, 2006). For participants unavailable for a focus group, individual interviews will be conducted, which will be audio recorded. Where participants are unable to attend an interview on campus, phone interviews will be conducted.

Interview and focus group audio will be transcribed verbatim. A coding system will be applied for a systematic approach for the analysis of the textual data (Creswell, 2014). An initial open-coding process will be conducted of each transcript to identify phenomena and concepts. From this, codes will be developed and a thematic coding process of all transcripts will be conducted in NVIVO software. A thematic analysis of the data will inform the findings of Phase 1 of the research. The perspectives of student and staff will be combined to provide a comprehensive view of effective practices (Silverman, 2011). An interpretation of the qualitative data will then inform the development of a survey instrument for Phase 2, along with a set of publicly available resources to promote inclusive online teaching practices.

Phase 2:

Findings from Phase 1 will be used to develop an online survey instrument that will collect both qualitative and quantitative data. Building on the understanding of the challenges faced by particular equity groups, and teaching practices that seem to enable these groups to participate in online learning, these surveys will seek to explore these issues in a larger sample. Two surveys will be developed, one focusing on students from non-traditional backgrounds, and one on teaching staff involved in online education.

The surveys will help to give a sense of the scale of the challenges for equity student groups participating in online higher education. These surveys will be distributed to a large sample size of equity group students (n=1500) and educators (n=500) who are studying or teaching in online or blended environments nation-wide. Data will be analysed quantitatively and qualitatively to determine effective practices and principles for inclusive online teaching in each equity group and discipline area, as well as over-arching principles. As the

design of the survey will depend greatly on the outcomes of Phase 1, the design of the questions and methods for analysis will be determined at a later stage of this study. The surveys will simultaneously aim collect data, while also directing participants to resources developed from the first phase of the research.

Intended research outcomes

This research as a whole seeks to disseminate knowledge about effective teaching practices for equity student groups in online education, as well as providing a set of resources and materials to promote these practices. The dissemination strategy is an important part of the research, with significant resources dedicated to the development of a website and other resources to help raise awareness of the challenges of equity student groups in online education, and effective approaches that can be used by university teachers.

Conclusion

This paper presents the rationale and approach of ongoing research that seeks to investigate principles and practices of socially inclusive teaching in online learning environments. It aims to understand the barriers to online learning faced by students from traditionally underrepresented groups in higher education and how online learning environments can support these students to participate. This research adopts a multiphase, mixed-method enquiry drawing on perspectives of both staff and students. It seeks to increase awareness and aptitude for the design and delivery of socially inclusive online learning environments to enhance participation and success for all students in online learning regardless of social, cultural, economic or physical barriers.

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