Improving Student Retention and Success Within the Context of Complex Lives and Diverse Circumstances

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1 Introduction

In the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, Australian universities, as in many other countries, have been delivering more online education than ever before. The imperative to improve the quality of online education delivery has never been greater. Much of the research and student statistics discussed in this chapter pre-date the Covid-19 pandemic and the subsequent expansion in online education delivery. However, as will be demonstrated, the recommendations offered within this chapter remain relevant within the current context of the online postgraduate student cohort.

According to government statistics from the Australian Government Department of Education, Skills and Employment (DESE 2019a), in 2019 there were around one million commencing and continuing domestic students enrolled at Australian universities, of which roughly a quarter were postgraduates. Approximately 34% of these postgraduate students—just over 80,000—were enrolled in an online mode of study. Online postgraduate programmes enable the participation of those who would not otherwise be able to enhance their university qualifications, including many older students who are studying alongside considerable work and family

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responsibilities. The same data cited above shows that, when comparing characteristics of online Australian postgraduate students with those who have chosen to study on campus, considerably higher proportions of online students were older (aged 30 and over) and were studying part-time. Women were also more highly represented. Table 1 below shows the comparative proportions.

Through its more flexible approach, online learning has been playing a significant role in widening participation within Australian higher education, particularly for those who are older and with other pressing responsibilities, including work and family, that would otherwise prevent them from university attendance (Stone 2017; Stone and O'Shea 2019b; Stone et al. 2016). It is also important to note that, within Australia, entry to university via recognition of prior learning (RPL) extends into the postgraduate space, with different universities taking varied approaches to how RPL is recognised (Pitman and Vidovich 2012). This has undoubtedly contributed to a further widening of participation and more equitable access to postgraduate education. It has meant that students from backgrounds and circumstances historically under-represented in higher education are entering online postgraduate programmes based on prior learning and work experiences, not necessarily previous university studies (Stone 2017). The online postgraduate student cohort therefore has increasingly included students who may have little to no experience of university expectations, let alone at postgraduate level.

While the equity benefits of this are clear in terms of opportunity for increased participation, there are inevitable challenges for this more diverse and predominantly older cohort of students as they strive to successfully add study to their other responsibilities and commitments. Table 2 below shows the percentages of Australian domestic postgraduate students, both online and on-campus, who completed their qualifications by June 2019, comparing those who commenced in 2015, 2013 and 2010 respectively (DESE 2019b).

It can be seen from the above table that a lower proportion of online students than on-campus students completed their qualifications by June 2019, for all commencement years. However, it is important to note that, at that time, there was a much higher proportion of part-time students within the online postgraduate cohort compared with those studying on-campus (82% vs. 48%). As Table 3 below demonstrates, part-time postgraduate students overall had significantly lower completion rates than those studying full-time, therefore the online completion rates were inevitably impacted by the high concentration of part-time students. As will be discussed in more detail later, part-time students tend to be particularly vulnerable, often

Table 1 Australian domestic postgraduate (PG) students 2019—comparative proportions of older, part-time and female students studying online and on-campus

PG student characteristics	Online	On-campus
Age 30+	70%	33%
Part-time	82%	48%
Female	64%	56%

Table 2 Percentage of PG students who completed their qualification by June 2019, by year of commencement and study mode

Year of commencement	Online	On-campus
2015 (completed within 4 years)	57.6%	66%
2013 (completed within 6 years)	67.3%	76.5%
2010 (completed within 9 years)	70%	78.1%

Table 3 Percentage of PG students who completed their qualification by June 2019, by year of commencement and study load

Year of commencement	Part-time	Full-time
2015 (completed within 4 years)	55.4%	74.6%
2013 (completed within 6 years)	66.4%	84.6%
2010 (completed within 9 years)	69.6%	86.7%

struggling to complete their studies within the expected time-frame as they juggle other complexities in their lives.

Tables 2 and 3 also show that a higher percentage of students completed their qualifications over 6 years compared with four, and an even higher percentage over 9 years. This is clear evidence that more students will complete if they have the option of spreading their studies out over a longer period of time, taking breaks and/or reducing study load when needed, rather than being restricted to, for example, 2–3 years full-time or 4–6 years part-time.

Within this chapter, we contend that the delivery of online postgraduate education cannot be separated from the contexts within which students are living and managing busy and complex lives. The following sections explore and expand further on this, discussing implications for both teaching and learning practices, support mechanisms and broader institutional considerations.

2 Online Student Experience

There is now a considerable body of research into the online student experience both in Australia and more widely. Overwhelmingly, this research points to the need for recognition by higher education institutions of the very different nature of this cohort, with its overrepresentation of older, part-time and female students, and the need for a more holistic, purpose-designed, whole-of-university approach to the development and delivery of online education (Devlin and McKay 2018; Dodo-Balu 2018; Kelly et al. 2016; Lewis 2017; Salmon 2014; Stone 2019). These students have busy, complex lives in which their student 'identity' has to take second,

third or even fourth place to other non-negotiable identities, such as those of parent, paid worker and/or family carer (Hewson 2018; Ragusa and Crampton 2018; Stone et al. 2019). While much of this research has focused on undergraduate (UG) online students, we believe that the findings are equally relevant for the postgraduate online cohort, if not more so, given that the postgraduate online cohort contains higher numbers of older students (82% PG vs. 70% UG aged 30+) and those studying part-time (70% PG vs. 52% UG). The gender balance is similar, with 64% being female in the postgraduate cohort, compared with 68% in the undergraduate cohort.

A number of factors that are key to improving online student experiences, retention and success have emerged from research over the past decade. Drawing on this research, both within Australia and internationally, these factors are outlined and discussed below.

3 Recognising the Multiple and Conflicting Identities of the Online Student

There is a strong argument for institutional understanding and recognition of the online cohort (at least, those who chose to study online prior to the Covid-19 pandemic) as being largely *different* from the on-campus cohort. Without acknowledgement of the 'important fundamental differences between on-campus and online learners' (Moore and Greenland 2017: 57) there are likely to be 'gaps between expectations and delivery' (Hewson 2018: 10) for both students and institutions.

As the data demonstrates, pre-pandemic, online students were more likely than those studying on-campus to be older, mature-age learners. As such, they were also more likely to be combining their studies with paid employment, either full or part-time, as well as with family/parenting responsibilities (Hewson 2018; Moore and Greenland 2017; Muir et al. 2019; Signor and Moore 2014; Stone and O'Shea 2019b). This has had inevitable implications for their identity as students. Results from longitudinal research (Hewson 2018) with online students at a large university in the United Kingdom (UK) found that 'a *dominant* [sic] student identity… is not realistic for online students' (11) who 'cannot prioritise their student identity over their work identity' (10); by necessity, these students 'prioritised family first, work second and study third' (4). It needs to be acknowledged that this may not be the case for *all* postgraduate online students, particularly now that the cohort has expanded post-pandemic.

There are now likely to be more students within the online postgraduate cohort who are not living with the other types of responsibilities that frequently conflict with or need to take priority over their studies. Nevertheless, these findings have been supported by longitudinal research with online students at a large Australian university (Dyment et al. 2020; Muir et al. 2019; Stone et al. 2019), which similarly found that the students' 'work/life commitments and events played a role in students' capacity to remain engaged with their studies' (Muir et al. 2019: 269). In the

lives of these students, 'family and work must come first… and study has to fit around these primary responsibilities' (Stone et al. 2019: 88).

4 Difference Does Not Equal Deficit

There is an equally strong argument that this *difference* should not be mistaken for *deficit.* Increasingly, research findings are recognising the positive value to institutions and classrooms that these older, online students bring, through their life and work experience, maturity and expertise at multi-tasking. These are students who can 'enrich online programmes [when] encouraged to utilise and share their knowledge and experiences with peers and educators' (Signor and Moore 2014: 312). Research findings stress the importance of 'recognising, understanding and valuing this cohort' (Stone and O'Shea 2019b: 66) for the strengths that they bring 'in terms of experience, commitment and resilience' (Stone 2017: 28). This is supported by research into improving outcomes amongst university students from diverse backgrounds more broadly (Devlin 2013; O'Shea et al. 2017), which similarly highlights the knowledge and experience that greater student diversity brings to the teaching and learning environment. However, it does need to be recognised that keeping these very busy, time-poor yet experience-rich students engaged in their online studies, presents significant challenges.

5 Engaging Online Students

Given the well-established connection between student engagement and retention (Kahu 2013; Kift et al. 2010; Kuh et al. 2008; Tinto 2006; Trowler and Trowler 2010), many researchers have emphasised the need to improve the quality of online education and its capacity to engage students more effectively. Research has revealed many challenges associated with online learning engagement, such as technology challenges which can be overwhelming for 'novice adult learners' (Yoo and Huang 2013: 160), or course material and delivery poorly designed for online (Devlin and McKay 2016), along with inadequate interaction with teachers and other students (Ilgaz and Gülbahar 2015; Stone and Springer 2019).

The need for a more interactive learning environment with strong 'teacher-presence' has been advocated by many (Boton and Gregory 2015; Canty et al. 2015; Delahunty et al. 2014; Kuiper et al. 2015; Oh and Kim 2016; Verenikina et al. 2017). Australian researchers Verenikina et al. (2017: 27) talk about the importance of 'lecturers' presence, expertise and commitment to ensuring quality learning takes place'. Connecting with online students through personal introductions, welcome activities, active facilitation of discussion closely related to learning outcomes, prompt feedback on students' contributions and tasks, are examples of ways in which students know that their teacher/lecturer is 'present', is interested in them,

and wants to support their learning (Dyment et al. 2019). One of the many challenges in building and maintaining this strong teacher-presence is that it is very time-consuming work, with at least some of this needing to happen outside of 'normal' campus hours, when the students are more likely to be online (Bussey 2021, this book).

However, relatively simple ways of improving both teacher-presence and interactivity are illustrated in a recent research project with postgraduate online students at a large, regional Australian university (Stone and Springer 2019). Aiming to improve student engagement and retention, the coordinator of an online Project Management course implemented a number of changes in his teaching approach from one semester to the next. These included developing more interactivity within course content, providing faster and more personal responses to student queries and emails, as well as getting in touch with students who appeared to be less engaged or having some difficulty. Evaluation of the changes revealed how much students appreciated the interactive environment and teacher contact, with comments such as 'lectures are very easy to get through without losing focus'; and 'despite the lack of physical lectures, questions were still very easy to ask, as [the lecturer] responds to email far more responsively [than] the majority of all… staff and services' (Stone and Springer 2019: 11–13).

Similar findings have emerged from another longitudinal research project (Dyment et al. 2020; Muir et al. 2019; Stone et al. 2019) in which nine teacher-education students studying online with a large regional Australian university were followed across the length of a full semester, with fortnightly interviews and weekly surveys monitoring their engagement with their studies over this time. Consistent with the general demographics of the online cohort, these students were all mature-aged, with family and paid work responsibilities. All but one were women, reflecting the higher numbers of women in both teacher-education and online studies. Findings showed that 'active and collaborative learning'; 'quality, timely feedback'; and 'multiple interactive activities' (Muir et al. 2019: 12) were all highly valued by the students. They reported being more engaged when a diversity of learning tasks and activities were offered, being 'appreciative of lecturers who used a variety of online pedagogies to facilitate learning opportunities' (Dyment et al. 2020: 10). Interaction with teachers was crucial to student engagement, while on the other hand, students were 'critical of the mandated social interactions' (Dyment et al. 2020: 9) that, while perhaps intended by their teachers to build student-to-student connections, were perceived by students as '"busy work" – tasks that kept them busy' without any real learning taking place. For example, some were particularly critical of the requirement that they make a certain number of posts to discussion boards each week, describing 'how the mandating of posts to prompt engagement felt "ridiculous" and "took a huge amount of time"' (Dyment et al. 2020: 7).

Certainly, for some of these students, it appeared to be 'the presence and behaviour of the lecturer, rather than peers, [that was] key to student engagement online' (Muir et al. 2019: 12). Others greatly valued interaction with peers also, such as a

comment by one student who talked about how she and another student had 'kind of helped clarify each other's expectations and what we were supposed to be doing. We were able to map it out together and that was a sense of community which was so nice' (student quote in Dyment et al. 2020: 10). Interestingly, such peer interactions were often outside the formal classroom situation, on social media channels that would not be measured as engagement via Learning Management System (LMS) analytics.

This same research project also found that online student engagement is likely to be enhanced and sustained when students are given the flexibility they need to manage their studies alongside the other complexities of their lives, as discussed in the section below.

6 Engaging Through a More Flexible Approach

All nine participants in this study noted the importance of flexibility (Stone et al. 2019). Similar to the UK students in Hewson's (2018: 5) longitudinal research who 'wanted all their learning materials to be available in advance', these Australian students wanted 'the flexibility to work ahead at one's own pace to fit study around other time-consuming commitments' (Stone et al. 2019: 84). They needed to be able to get as much done as they could ahead of time, to avoid falling behind when busy with work or family commitments. However, this was often impossible due to their courses being designed for delivery on a week-by-week basis. With their university offering the same degree programme for both on- and off-campus students, the same course material was being used for both, hence the online students were expected to work at the same pace as those on-campus.

The students in this research project had chosen to study online because of the promise of flexibility that they believed they had been given by their university. This was 'a significant influence in their decision-making about whether to enrol' (Stone et al. 2019: 89). Instead, they often found an 'office-hours' approach in which, for example, they were expected to have tasks completed by Friday, denying them the weekend to attend to study tasks, or they were required to attend compulsory synchronous webinars even though they were working or caring for children. Such expectations meant that the flexibility being offered was quite limited. As one student explained, 'we're doing a web conference tomorrow night, which is compulsory, at 7:30 to 9:00, which I thought, "Oh, if you had kids, if you were working…"' (student quote in Stone et al. 2019: 82).

Indeed, the inconsistencies between universities' promises of flexibility for online students and actual practice have been noted in other research (Hewson 2018; Ragusa and Crampton 2018), with Moore and Greenland (2017: 52) reporting that 'many online educators are using policies and protocols that are designed for traditional on-campus students without adequate adaptation for the online learner'. This lack of flexibility has been found to impact particularly severely on women, as the following section explores.

7 Flexibility and Gender

Women are more strongly represented in Australian online study than in on-campus study at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels (DESE 2019a). This is also the case at universities with substantial numbers of fully online students within New Zealand (New Zealand Ministry of Education 2018), the United Kingdom (The Open University 2014/15) and North America (Athabasca University 2019). The additional responsibilities of family and paid work that older online students tend to be carrying generally impact more on women (Stone and O'Shea 2019a). Data from the Australian Human Rights Commission (2018) show that Australian women carry a higher load of caregiving than do men, with women accounting for 70% of primary unpaid carers of children, 68% of primary carers of others and 58% of carers of the elderly and people with disability or long-term health conditions. With women so firmly entrenched in the caring role both within the family and the paid workforce, it is not surprising that this has resulted in their long-term disadvantage in higher education, reflected in the higher numbers of women as part-time students, the greater length of time taken to complete qualifications and the higher attrition rates amongst women aged 25 and over (Chesters and Watson 2014; Mallman and Lee 2016; Pocock et al. 2009; Stone and O'Shea 2013). It is, perhaps, also not surprising that higher numbers of women are choosing the flexibility of online study, hoping to manage study more successfully around their caring commitments (Stone and O'Shea 2019a).

Indeed, various studies have demonstrated the ways in which women perform this juggling act. For example, Hewson's study with online students revealed 'a lack of structure' in the women's study habits, mainly due to 'childcare and extra-curricular activities', with most studying 'in their homes' while multi-tasking, such as by listening to 'course-related audio recordings over their tablet or phone while cooking' (Hewson 2018: 88). Similarly, Stone et al. (2019: 88) describe how, for the participants in their research, 'most have children, and some are also caring for elderly parents', meaning that 'study has to fit around these primary responsibilities'. Students who are managing both paid work and caring responsibilities alongside their studies are doubly disadvantaged. While online study may provide more opportunity for women with family caring responsibilities to undertake university studies, it is certainly not an easy task; it requires good planning, time management, multitasking and negotiation skills. Insufficient flexibility in university policies and expectations simply adds another layer of complexity.

Such issues highlight more broadly the institutional barriers that impact negatively on students' experiences of online learning, further explored below.

8 Institutional Barriers

Research conducted prior to the Covid-19 pandemic showed that, amongst many academic and professional staff involved in online education at Australian universities, there was a perception that their universities viewed online delivery 'as being

less important, or of a lower priority, than on-campus education delivery', and as part of an '"out of sight, out of mind" phenomenon' (Stone 2017: 26). Some were concerned that the increase in online delivery was largely financially driven (Downing et al. 2019: 64) even though the cost of providing online education may be higher than institutions expect (Norton et al. 2013).

Research conducted with a wide range of staff, both academic and professional, at 15 Australian universities offering online undergraduate and postgraduate degrees (Stone 2017, 2019), indicated the need for a more holistic, university-wide approach to online education, in which online delivery would be recognised and understood as being of equal importance as on-campus delivery. This whole-of-institution approach needs to include: a clear and comprehensive understanding of the demographics and diversity of the online cohort; the development of and adherence to quality standards for online education; design and delivery that is interactive, promoting engagement and communication between teacher, students and peers; a flexible approach whereby students can make the most of their limited time; and the embedding of support, both academic and personal, within the curriculum.

One of the difficulties in achieving this seems to stem from the fact that, within Australia, all public universities that deliver online degrees, both postgraduate and undergraduate, are also delivering on-campus education. While some of the larger, regional universities have a slightly higher number of students studying remotely online than attending on-campus classes, there is no university that focusses primarily on delivering online education. It is this mix of on-campus and online delivery that seems to result in online education taking a back seat. Hewson (2018) talks of the challenges faced by lecturers and tutors responsible for teaching a mix of on-campus and online students, particularly when there is little if any recognition by their universities of the very different needs and considerations implicit in online teaching.

This lack of recognition can manifest itself in a lack of adequate resourcing, training and mentoring for online teaching staff, particularly sessional (casual) staff, leading to situations where committed teaching staff are working many unpaid hours to deliver a better learning experience for their students, with insufficient support and recognition (Dodo-Balu 2017; Downing et al. 2019). Many online teachers, aware of the 'positive correlation between teacher engagement and student retention', are willing 'to position their students' satisfaction and engagement above adherence to institutional work-load allocations' (Downing et al. 2019: 64). They do this because they know from experience how important it is for teachers to be regularly and clearly 'present' in the virtual classroom; to develop a learning community to which online students can feel they belong. Experienced online teachers understand the nature of the online cohort, recognising both their needs and their strengths. For example, in a study of 18 teachers within Education degrees across 19 different universities in Australia, the online student was described as being 'quite different to their traditional, on-campus, student' in that they were 'more mature, juggling multiple roles'. There was evidence that these students' strengths were recognised and appreciated, when 'descriptors such as "committed", "motivated", "focused", "engaged" were repeatedly used' (Downing et al. 2019: 66).

Evidence strongly indicates that without the presence, support and encouragement of these committed teachers, students are much less likely to persist and

succeed (Kahu et al. 2014; Redmond et al. 2018). However, despite the willingness of these and other teachers to support their online students, many face considerable institutional barriers to doing so through a lack of recognition of the importance of their work and the time taken to do it well (see also Aitken and Hayes 2021, this book). In the words of one lecturer, ‘it’s very time-consuming and tutors aren’t paid for that amount of time; we’re not supposed to spend a lot of time on it and you’re always chasing your tail because there’s just not enough time’ (Stone 2017: 37).

9 Discussion

From the various research findings discussed within this chapter some key points consistently emerge. Firstly, pre-pandemic, Australian higher education student data (DESE 2019a) showed that there were certainly significant demographic differences between online and on-campus postgraduate students, with those online more likely to be older, part-time and with multiple other responsibilities including employment and family commitments. There was also a higher proportion of women within this cohort, likely to have more care-giving responsibilities than similarly aged male students. Postgraduate online students were also less likely than their on-campus counterparts to be familiar and experienced with university academic expectations, having either had a significant gap in their formal learning, or entered without previous university-level qualifications, or both. It was also more likely that online postgraduate students had significant professional workplace experience with many employed in fields directly related to the qualification for which they were studying.

Secondly and related to the above, the student cohort that is both older and more committed with multiple other life responsibilities, is more likely to be able to persist and succeed with their studies if a flexible approach is offered across the full range of their university experience. This includes flexible access to their course content and materials, to help them maximise their limited time most effectively by working ahead when they can and doing a bit less when other commitments need to take priority. It also includes a more flexible and less bureaucratic approach to dealing with requests for assessment extensions, recognising that rigid policies and procedures, designed with on-campus students in mind, are not likely to equitably meet the needs and circumstances of these older, online learners. ‘Equal treatment for all students, no matter their different circumstances, is not likely to be equitable’ (Stone et al. 2019: 89).

Thirdly, as explored in the chapter ‘Online Postgraduate Teaching: Re-Discovering Human Agency’ by Aitken and Hayes (2021, this book), the online teacher is of paramount importance in building and sustaining the engagement of online students. Online tutors have been described as ‘the human interface between the university and its students’ (Quartermaine et al. 2012: 66), whose presence, in the form of regular, supportive contact and interaction, helps to motivate students to persist with their studies, even when the going gets tough. Equally, a lack of contact and

interaction with online teachers, such as no replies or acknowledgment of student posts in discussion forums, is a disengaging experience for students, 'engendering a sense of loneliness' (O'Shea et al. 2015: 50) and impacting negatively on their motivation.

Teacher presence is also about teachers being willing to invest themselves and their personalities into the online space, creating a more interesting learning experience, in which students feel 'engaged by lecturers who showed personality or variety in their lectures: telling a story that personalised the material or themselves' (Muir et al. 2019: 10). The teacher's behaviour also has ramifications for peer interaction in the online space; 'if the tutor's very active and engaging with students, generally the students are more willing to engage with each other' (O'Shea et al. 2015: 49). Academics who teach online are equally aware of how much student persistence and retention is influenced by their presence; 'When there's no responses to emails and no responses to discussion forums … the attrition rate's higher and the students are really unhappy' (staff quote in Stone 2019: 6).

With so much riding on the teacher's interaction with students, it is unfortunate when the importance of this is not recognised at an institutional level, leaving online teachers, many of them casual staff, feeling isolated and unappreciated, with inadequate payment for the hours of work involved. Dodo-Balu's research with online tutors (2017) has revealed that 'tutors are donating significant amounts of their own time to achieve a quality experience for their students… [at] significant personal cost to the individual tutors' (11). She contends that while online students can 'flourish' (4) through supportive and engaging teaching, the same tutors providing this positive experience are often left to 'wither' (4).

Fourthly, courses that are designed specifically for the online environment are more likely to capture and maintain students' engagement with their learning. They must offer more than 'an electronic version of the on campus equivalent' (Downing et al. 2019: 67) and instead 'be designed for online first and foremost' to create 'an inclusive learning space for all students' (Stone 2017: 9). Given the time constraints that most online students are facing, ensuring that courses are well designed for online interactivity, engagement and support is crucial. Clear evidence from multiple sources indicates that online learning tasks and activities need to be 'relevant, authentic', using 'a diversity of approaches to learning in the online space' (Dyment et al. 2020: 10), to develop and maintain student engagement. With many online postgraduate students employed in workplaces directly related to their studies, there is an opportunity to build on this advantage through applied learning design, linking workplace experiences more explicitly with learning tasks and vice versa, hence building on students' expertise and strengths as well as increasing the direct relevance of the learning content (Dyment et al. 2019).

However, while they may have substantial work and other life experience, many students may have little experience of postgraduate academic expectations (see Hounsell 2021, this book). Course design therefore needs to include content and activities that develop academic skills and support their learning. There has been recognition for some time of the importance of embedding support within on-campus curricula, to ensure students have 'timely access to support' and to help

develop ‘a strong sense of belonging’ (Kift et al. 2010: 14). For online students this is even more crucial. Collaborating with other areas of the university can ensure appropriate embedded support within the course design, assisting students to understand and manage the academic expectations of the course.

The fifth point is about the need for collaboration across the institution more broadly, with academic and professional staff working together to deliver ‘joined-up academic and non-academic support for students in a holistic way’ (staff quote in Stone 2019: 8). The demands on teaching staff become more manageable if a team approach is taken to supporting online students with their learning. Library services, academic skills development, other specialised personal support services—and very importantly educational technology and online learning designers—all have roles to play, to ensure a holistic approach is taken within teaching, learning and support. Embedding resources within course content at the right times becomes achievable through this team approach, such as one example from a Library Manager, ‘if their referencing is not great … okay, we’ll get one of my team in … we’ll create some sort of online resource to embed’ (quote in Stone 2019: 8). Collaboration between learning designers, academic staff and professional support services staff can ensure that a course is designed to include timely support at different stages, such as when assessments and exams are approaching, or new skills are required to meet learning objectives. Clear information about specialist support such as for students with disability or those needing personal counselling, can be more easily and appropriately included through such a team approach to course design, with the added advantage that all staff become more aware of each other’s roles and what each can offer to students, making cross-referral easier.

The sixth and final point is about the need for institutions to be prepared to adapt to changing environments—be they internal, external or both—and this this must be led by strong leadership from the senior executive levels. This has been highlighted in 2020 by the sudden imperative to make rapid changes across institutions in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. Across Australia, as in other countries around the world, the need to increase online offerings as a result of Covid-19 and campus closures has seen universities quickly examining and strengthening the infrastructure and policies that support this mode of learning (Ali 2020). Added to this was the realisation that the short-term loss of international students may, in fact, prove to be the pre-cursor to a new post-mobility world where students no longer cross borders to study internationally (White and Lee 2020). Hence, there has been an increased focus on the tensions that exist between the rhetoric and the reality of online higher education, with calls amongst the academic community for ‘a change in mindset’ within universities (Warburton et al. 2020); ‘sustained dialogue and collaboration’ with students (Dollinger 2020); and the need to embrace ‘the great online education opportunity’ (Verbyla 2020), to name but a few.

From these key points discussed above, a number of recommendations on ways to improve the retention and success of online postgraduate students are offered for institutions and educators.

10 Recommendations

To improve student retention and success in online postgraduate education, a strategic whole-of-institution approach is required. While this needs to be led from the top, a bottom-up approach to its development is essential, so that it is informed by those within the institution who have the practical and theoretical knowledge and experience of online delivery (see also Fawns et al. 2021, this book). Ultimately, the institution needs to treat online education as 'core business' and award it at least equal attention and resources as for on-campus delivery. It is *different* from on-campus delivery and as such requires dedicated quality standards that encompass online development, design, delivery and support, developed through the professional expertise of those involved and experienced in each of these areas. These standards should be widely and articulately disseminated across all areas of the university, with clear expectations that they are followed, reviewed and revised through a process of continuous quality improvement.

Within this context, the following recommendations are offered as essential components in the development of a strategic, university-wide approach to online postgraduate education; one that is understood and embodied across all levels of the institution, including programme, course, discipline and all other academic and professional services. Each recommendation is followed by some questions to consider when beginning to think about possible implementation.

1. *Know your students:* their demographic characteristics, strengths, needs and experiences. Are they likely to need additional support/orientation/academic preparation? Are they likely to have significant caring and/or employment responsibilities that they will at times need to prioritise? How can this be accommodated? Are there ways in which their life and work experience can contribute to the learning and interactions within the class?
2. *Consider how much flexibility can be offered to this cohort:* Is there sufficient flexibility within university policies and processes to enable staff to use their discretion in how they adjust their practices to better meet the needs of online students? For example, how and when can they access course content and work on learning and assessment tasks? Are there any barriers to their participation? Are synchronous activities compulsory? Has their need to study on weekends and after-hours been considered? How do assessment extension policies and processes impact upon this cohort? Are they disadvantaged by being subject to the same expectations as on-campus students?
3. *Recognise the importance of a strong teacher-presence:* regular, meaningful communication and interaction between teacher and students is essential to building a strong learning community. Recognise also the time-demands this places on teaching staff. Do lecturers/tutors have sufficient time to connect and interact with their students? Is training and mentoring available to help build skills in online teaching? Who is supporting the teachers?
4. *Design for online:* what may work well on campus will not necessarily provide an engaging experience online. How could the material be designed differently

for online? Does the university have quality standards for online design and delivery? Are there learning designers, experienced in educational technology, working with academic staff to advise on appropriate course design that will engage remote students and keep them better connected with the course content and the online class? To what extent can support be embedded?

5. *Build collaboration across the different areas of the university:* a range of different skills are needed to design and deliver an engaging, supportive and holistic learning experience for online students. What different types of input/expertise are needed? How can these be brought together? Are academic and professional staff talking with each other about this? Do they each know what the other is doing, and how and why? Does the university have a strategic approach to online postgraduate education that involves cross-disciplinary and cross-division teamwork? How could this be achieved?

11 Conclusion

In this chapter, we have explored the findings from a range of research studies into online student experiences, applying them particularly to online postgraduate education. Based on these findings, we contend that the delivery of online postgraduate education cannot be separated from the social and cultural contexts within which students are managing busy and complex lives. Furthermore, these contexts need to be recognised at an institutional level. From the summary of key research findings, we have offered recommendations for educators at all levels across higher education institutions, including those who design, coordinate and teach online, those who support students with their learning through library services, academic and personal support, as well as administrators and policy makers. These are recommendations on ways to ensure that the lived reality of the student cohort is well-understood and appropriately considered in the development, design and delivery of online postgraduate education, thereby enhancing student engagement, retention and success.

As mentioned at the start of this chapter, with the expansion of online learning to a wider range of students due to Covid-19, there has never been a more urgent time to improve the quality of online design and delivery in higher education. During and post-pandemic, on-campus content has been hastily redesigned for online uploading, with the likelihood of a very mixed experience indeed. We propose that the recommendations contained within this chapter are equally relevant for the broader postgraduate student population now studying online. As a predominantly older group of students, many within the postgraduate cohort are juggling significant responsibilities and constraints, requiring flexibility and support to successfully manage their studies within this context. We encourage all involved in the development/delivery/design of online education and online support services, including those who have by necessity entered this domain more recently, to use these recommendations to inform both strategic direction and day-to-day practice, thereby improving outcomes for online students.

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