

***“I’m a Different Person Now”: Online Learning as a De-Facto Higher Education
Equity Pathway to Transforming Lives***

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Abstract

In line with global trends in higher education, many Australian universities are energetically embracing the concept of flexible online learning, which has significantly increased the number of students studying university courses through online and/or open-access delivery. This mode is highly utilised by non-traditional students, and is therefore an important avenue to fulfil Australian government policies aimed at equity of access. Without online access many successful students would remain excluded from university study. Within a Qualitative/Interpretivist approach, my research utilises in-depth interviews and an analysis of students’ reflective work to develop a complex and nuanced picture of their experience with online study. The focus is on a core, first-year unit, designed to facilitate the successful transition of new-to-university students into academic life in an online environment. This acts as an instrumental case study (Stake, 2008) for examining the experience of online, non-traditional students within the learning environment formed by these broader policy-related trends in higher education. Findings point to the transformative power of participation in university level study for successful online students.

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Introduction

Over the last few decades, the teaching and learning carried out in Australian higher education institutions has seen significant changes, reflective of similar changes internationally. Three policy-related trends which are driving these changes in Australia are: wider student participation; flexible, online learning; and an increasingly casualized academic teaching staff. These trends work together to create conditions of teaching and learning which are quite different to those of perhaps thirty years ago. My research is concerned with understanding how these conditions affect the experience of participants in the contemporary higher education 'classroom'. Using a qualitative research methodology, I focus on a first-year core unit offered online through Open Universities Australia (OUA) as an instrumental case study. The unit, pseudonymously named Academic Transition Unit or ATU100 for research purposes, can be seen as a representative microcosm of the conditions produced by these three major trends.

In Australia, OUA works with partner universities to enable its students to graduate with a degree which is completely equivalent to that obtained by students who enrol in these universities directly. Students study fully online within the learning management system (LMS) of the university offering the degree, but have the opportunity to mix in units from other partner universities, to study over four study periods per year rather than two semesters, and, in some cases, to enter without any academic pre-requisites. Consequently, units offered through OUA, such as ATU100, become highly representative of the first two trends mentioned above, as students from diverse backgrounds enrol to take advantage of this flexible, online structure. Further, up to 90 to 100% of the teaching staff in ATU100 consists of casual tutors in any given study period, which is in line with the third major trend. While not wanting to diminish the work of these tutors, which is addressed in another article (Dodo-Balu, in press) this paper has a primary focus on the students. Utilising in-depth interviews and other qualitative research methods, my research aims to construct a complex and nuanced picture of the student experience within the learning environment formed by these broader trends in higher education. My research findings point to the transformative power of participation in university level study for successful online students. This is the story behind the screens.

From the literature

Recent Australian government policy has placed an emphasis on increasing the participation of students in higher education, particularly those from disadvantaged and low socio-economic backgrounds (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent, & Scales, 2008). From 2012, the government has removed caps on student university places for most degrees (Norton, 2013) creating a demand-driven system in which higher education providers are free to enroll as many students as they wish (James, 2010). It is these policies that are effectively driving the trend towards wider student participation. According to James (2010) Australian universities have now entered a phase of creating a universal higher education system.

One way to facilitate a universalizing system is to make available more flexible modes of course delivery. In a demand driven system, government funding is directly linked to the success with which an institution can reach and enroll an increasing number, and a broader range, of new students (Edwards, 2011). Many universities

offer fully online or blended courses in addition to their on-campus offerings, as a way to attract further enrolments. The choice to study online is often made due to the student's location, employment obligations, family commitments, or medical related reasons. There is therefore a high representation of 'non-traditional' students in online units, particularly those classified as mature-age, regional or remote, low socio-economic status or with physical or mental health issues.

It is evident that the opportunities afforded by online education have created a de-facto equity pathway (Cupitt & Golshan, 2015) without which many successful students would remain excluded from university study. As stated by Stone, O'Shea, May, Delahunty and Partington (2016, p.146), '[o]nline learning has an important place in widening access and participation in higher education for diverse student cohorts'. This indicates a significant conflation between the trend of wider student participation and the availability of flexible, online learning. These two trends work together to create a large and varied online cohort, consisting of students who may enter university with widely different levels of academic preparedness.

There is a recognition that it can no longer be assumed that all students enrolling in university courses will be equipped to succeed in their degrees. As James states, '... universities must accept that one of their roles is to address shortfalls in schooling for some people' (2010, p.10). The growth in academic transition units such as ATU100, the focus unit for my research, is a response to this. However, the literature still tends to convey an overall bleak picture of the multiple challenges facing non-traditional students who are new to university. Yorke and Longden (2004) found that these students are likely to have a 'fragile self-belief' (p.83) about their capacity to succeed in an academic environment. Non-traditional students, particularly those from low socio-economic backgrounds, are less likely to believe that they belong in a university environment, creating a sense of a disjunction and isolation (Berger, 2000), and are more likely to be intimidated and overwhelmed by their first year (McInnes & James 2004). Moreover, Bach, Haynes and Lewis-Smith (2007) outline the additional challenge for online students of having to acquire technical proficiency in navigating the online learning site, at the same time as they are developing academic competence. While most universities offer physical spaces on campus where students can find academic support, these are not generally accessible to online students (Muldoon & Wilyegewardene, 2012), putting them at a further disadvantage. Thus, the literature suggests that the students participating in ATU100 and similar online units may be operating from the worst possible position regarding retention.

It has certainly been widely noted that the levels of attrition in fully online units are much higher than for units studied on campus (Cupitt & Golshan, 2015). However, Nichols (2010) points out that the measurement of retention and attrition in online courses is a complex issue and that a certain level of attrition is normal. 'Difficulties arise in terms of who to count as having dropped out' (p. 95). It is more likely, for example, that students may '...drop out before the course even begins' in the online environment, which can falsely inflate attrition figures (Nichols, 2010, p. 95). This indicates that the prospects for non-traditional, online students may be less bleak than they first appear. Stone et al. (2016, p.163) outline the positive benefits of online learning where a '...growth in confidence and self-esteem [is] evident as the students progress through their studies'.

Personal determination is a key element cited by successful online students (Nichols, 2010; Beck & Milligan, 2014). Cuppit and Golshan (2015) cite 'grit' as the most important quality that online students need to overcome challenges and achieve success. Grit is defined by Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews and Kelly (2007) as 'perseverance and passion for long-term goals'. Further elements identified as important for online students are institutional and peer support (Cuppit and Golshan, 2015). In online learning environments, '...tutors... act as the human interface between the university and its students' (Quartermaine, O'Hare, & Cooke., 2012, p. 66) and are therefore the main actors in the provision of institutional support. According to Garrison, Cleveland-Innes, and Fung (2010), teaching presence has emerged as key to the quality of the student experience. Also important is the excitement generated by the opportunity to participate in university study (Stone, 2008) and join an active learning community, which for many students is only possible because of the availability of online courses (Stone et al., 2016).

Methodology and method

This paper is based on a qualitative /interpretivist case study of a particular university unit, ATU100. The focus of qualitative research is on meaning and interpretation (Liamputtong, 2009), allowing the researcher to develop more complex and richer insights than can be drawn from quantitative studies (Creswell, 2008). Interpretivist research seeks to '...get into the head of the actor' (Schwandt, 2000, p. 192) in order to gain a deep understanding of their lived experience. However, the extent to which this is an objective understanding is questionable (Schwandt, 2000; Laverty, 2003). "Understanding is always more than merely re-creating someone else's meaning" (Gadamer, as cited in Laverty, 2003, p.25), but is necessarily combined with the meanings brought by the researcher. The act of interpreting is influenced by the socio-historically inherited traditions and personal experiences of the researcher (Laverty, 2003). This is an important point in relation to my research as I have participated in ATU100 as a tutor, which adds a subjective, insider lens but may also influence data interpretation.

Constructive Grounded Theory is a method of data analysis which acknowledges the place of researcher subjectivity (Creswell, 2008). This method moves away from the positivist view that theory is something external to be discovered, but rather sees theoretical understanding as a construction (Charmaz, 2014). Grounded theory method complements other qualitative approaches to data analysis. My research makes use of grounded theory method in the context of an instrumental case study. Instrumental case studies serve the purpose of illuminating a wider issue (Creswell, 2008) or deepening our understanding of a particular concern by allowing an insider's view (Stake, 2008). The case of ATU100 serves to bring insight into the conditions of teaching and learning created by macro level trends related to current policies in Australian higher education and to develop an in-depth understanding of how participants experience these conditions within their learning.

Data collection and analysis was conducted following the processes of *emerging design*, *initial sampling*, and *theoretical sampling* in accordance with Constructivist grounded theory method. Emerging design is a process by which the researcher collects data, immediately analyses it, and makes decisions about the next step in the research process (Creswell, 2008). Engaging with early findings is an important step

in emerging design as these findings initiate the process of theoretical sampling which continues throughout the study, and guides the researcher in designing the next phase. “Initial sampling in grounded theory gets you started; theoretical sampling guides where you go” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 197). Theoretical sampling allows the researcher to collect strategic, specific data in order to elaborate and refine theoretical categories as they emerge and is a “...pivotal grounded theory strategy” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 199).

The first stage of the study utilized initial sampling to start the process of identifying theoretical categories and refining the research design. According to Charmaz (2014), initial sampling involves establishing sampling criteria relevant to the study before entering the field, and selecting research participants who reflect the criteria. Three students were included in the initial research sample (as well as three tutors). The students had completed the focus unit in recent study periods, and were chosen in response to the ideas that had emerged from the literature regarding the effect of self-belief and personal determination on the success of students in the online learning environment. During their study periods, the three students had expressed doubts to their tutor about their capacity to complete the unit but were subsequently successful. After completion, they were emailed a survey consisting of a mix of open-ended questions, and statements with Likert scale responses along with a personal invitation for participation in one or more interviews. Survey and interview questions aimed to explore their experience and elicit key factors which facilitated their completion of the unit. Data from their completed surveys and recorded interviews were then analysed and coded for emerging themes.

For subsequent stages of the research both targeted and generalised invitation emails were sent to students who had previously enrolled in the unit, resulting in responses which yielded qualitative data from a further nine students. These stages made use of survey and interview questions which were refined towards validating the coded themes. Document analysis of participating students’ emails, reflective work and other assignments was also conducted.

This research also made use of data from a large online survey involving ATU100 students which was conducted by the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education (NCSEHE) from 2014 to 2015 (used with permission), and an analysis of retention and attrition figures from the unit’s LMS in a representative study period.

The relevance of ATU100

ATU100 is a large unit offered in all four of the study periods that make up the OUA academic year, with more than 300 students enrolling per study period. In general, students enrol in ATU100 as the first unit towards their bachelor degree, which makes this unit an important gateway to a positive and successful university experience. ATU100 aims to introduce students to the learning, thinking and communication processes that are important in the university setting. In addition to practical academic skills, critical thinking and reflection are foregrounded in the unit. Students complete reflective tasks over the course of the unit, including critical analysis of academic material and their own learning and thinking. Thus, the unit lends itself well to in-depth examination of the student experience.

ATU100 is highly representative of the conflated trends of wider student participation and online, flexible delivery. Data for the Online Learner Engagement Survey conducted by NCSEHE reveal a largely non-traditional cohort. The survey received 126 responses from ATU100 students. Of the respondents, students over the age of twenty-five accounted for 78% of the cohort, with 46% aged between thirty and forty-nine. Many of the respondents owned their own home, 43% compared with 22% who stated that they lived with their parents. These figures suggest that students have other important responsibilities in addition to their studies. Information on their previous educational attainments compared with the age groups stated above, indicate that many students have been away from study for some time. 31% of respondents stated that their highest level of education was high school, while 14% had attempted university previously but not completed. In addition, 37% of respondents indicated that they were the first in their family to study at university. These figures point to a large number of ATU100 students who are likely to be unfamiliar with contemporary university level study. This makes the development of the academic skills and understandings taught in the unit crucial to their subsequent success.

Statistical figures from the LMS of a representative study period indicate a very high attrition rate for ATU100, but also reveal a pattern of non-participation which supports the contention of Nichols (2010) that in order to understand the issue of retention and attrition in online learning, the surrounding complexity must be considered. For the study period in question, of all the students who enrolled in the unit, only 39% completed, indicating a 61% attrition rate. However, a closer look raises questions as to whether many of the enrolling students had the intention of participating. 17% of the enrolments did not log into the LMS, with a further 30% submitting no assignments. Thus, 47% of enrolling students may be regarded as not having begun full participation in the unit. This indicates that some students may enrol in the unit without making a firm decision to undertake a degree. Taking the remaining students, who attempted at least the first assignment, as the participating cohort, the rate of non-completion falls to 28%. Further, the figures show that the majority of the participating students successfully completed the unit, with a 77% pass rate. 25% of these students achieved a grade of High Distinction, awarded to those students who achieve a mark of 80 or above. These kinds of achievements may be linked to the transformational power of online study noted by Stone (2008) and Stone et al. (2006) in their research.

Students' own words

Qualitative data from twelve students who had previously participated in ATU100 were gathered through open-ended survey questions, personal interviews, personal email responses, and an analysis of students' assignment submissions for the unit. Findings are outlined below with the stories of some individual students given a special focus. For ethical reasons, personal names have been altered and no identifying details have been used.

Online, flexible study is the only way

It is very clear that online study provides an opportunity of obtaining a university degree to people who would otherwise be excluded from higher education study, supporting the idea that it creates a significant equity pathway. All the students in the

study stated that online, flexible learning was their only option. The reasons given encompass many of the characteristics of particular target student equity groups as defined by the Australian government (Department of Education and Training, 2015), specifically low socio economic status (SES) students, regional and remote students, and students with disabilities.

Low socio-economic status (SES)

Low SES impacts on students' ability to finance themselves to undertake studies on campus and makes the option of leaving work for study unfeasible. Furthermore, mature-age students often have families to support and financial commitments to meet. These points combine to create a situation for many students in which time and financial resources are limited. As Janelle (not her real name) shared in her survey response:

“Splitting my time between being a mum, and part-time work, leaves me with very few daylight hours to attend a normal on-campus study regime. Online study gives me the flexibility to study at night, between shifts and during nap time, without having to travel out of my way” (Janelle).

Janelle stated her income as being between 20,000 and 40,000 dollars per year and that she had one son. Her son was a major inspiration for her return to study and improve her financial circumstances.

“I hope to be a positive role model for my son, showing him that through hard work, you can achieve a career you can be proud of and enjoy.” and “I hope to be a better provider by finding a career more financially stable...” (Janelle).

Regional and remote

Living in a regional or remote area is a commonly cited reason for choosing online study. Four of the students interviewed stated that online study was their only option because of their home location, with family responsibilities and/or financial pressures precluding moving away from home or travelling significant distances to study at a university campus. For Ayla, “it just doesn't make sense” to make the half day trip to and from her closest university to attend campus, so she felt that she had to make online study work for her. Lina too acknowledges that “online study is my only option due to the remote location of my home”. Melissa is a mother and a practicing artist whose closest university is over an hour away by car, but this small, regional campus, doesn't offer an art degree. However, in her own words:

“The [closer universities] weren't an option... even to travel. I've got children at home, or one child still at home at this point and I've got an art practice to keep up as well and to foresee that I would be able to travel... for lectures and things it just wouldn't be viable, I know that” (Melissa).

Disabilities

Students with physical or mental health issues are highly represented in ATU100 and online courses in general. The availability of online study provides them with the opportunity to not only gain university qualifications but also to be involved in a diverse and active learning community where their disability is not a focus. Ill health makes it difficult to commit to activities outside the home. Moira's health issues make following a regular on-campus timetable problematic "...as I don't know from one day to the next how I will be feeling" (Moira). This also indicates that the flexibility offered by OUA to opt into or out of particular study periods is another important facilitator into study for these students. "Studying online meets my need for flexible learning as I can set my own pace and study calendar (and) minimise any disruption to my medical treatment" (Moira). In the online environment of the unit, Moira was energetic and engaged. She took the initiative to set up an online 'motivational lounge' for students to support each other. "This space was envisaged as a forum for sharing our 'real' life experiences whether they were positive or negative" (Moira).

Amanda is a single mother who suffers from bipolar disease. She had attempted university before but did not complete due to the stress of interacting with groups of people.

"I think that (on campus study) was a bit of an impediment for me personally. Studying in groups of people (face-to-face) where I had that stress of being in groups...wasn't ideal for me" (Amanda).

Being able to study online has given Amanda the opportunity to continue with her studies.

"In spite of having greater stability, if I'd attempted to do a real time course rather than on online course... I think the pressures probably would have been too much for me even at this point" (Amanda).

For Amanda too, flexibility is important. She took a study period off after completing ATU100 when her daughter had a serious accident and to attend to impact on her own health. "That was handy to know that I hadn't lost too much time... that I could take that... break and then re-enrol for the next study period" (Amanda).

Louise's survey response clearly conveys the importance of online learning to her study. "I am housebound – online was really the only way it would happen" (Louise). For Louise, it is not only her own illness that makes attending campus impossible, but also the fact that she is a carer for other members of her family, who all have health issues which require significant amounts of her attention, support and time. Online study provides relief. In an email she writes, "But I love studying so much - I'm hoping that it will become an anchor in my life - something I can cling to" (Louise).

The responsibility of caring for family members with ill health is also the major reason for younger students to enrol in an online cohort. Christiana enrolled in ATU100 straight out of high school. Her circumstances really combine all three of the equity categories discussed here, as she puts her income at between 20,000 and 40,000 dollars per year, lives in a rural location, and is the primary carer of her invalid

mother while suffering from ill health herself. While many young people from rural areas are able to move to a city to attend university, Christiana found her opportunity through online learning. She also appreciates the flexibility to alter her study pattern when her mother's illness worsens.

Transformation of students' self-perceptions

It seems clear that online learning is an important access gateway to higher education for students in equity categories. However, the experience of being a university student needs to be a positive and successful one to make this access worthwhile. The ATU100 students involved in this study have strongly indicated that this is the case which contrasts to the cautious tone prevalent in the literature. As a first unit towards their degree, participation in ATU100 appears to trigger transformational learning for successful students. Transformational learning involves the construction new meaning structures which can incorporate students' changing world and the changes within themselves (Willans and Seary, 2015). Moira began to critically question her own beliefs and those of others. In her interview she states, "...the unit...altered my perception even of who I am as an individual and where I fit within the social norm-my stereotypes..." (Moira).

Students found greater confidence in themselves and in their interaction with others. Joanna, describes herself as a disabled, single mother of four who had been away from study for twenty years. She was "very nervous and easily overwhelmed" when she first joined ATU100, but states that "I transformed from a student unable to participate, to one who really looked forward to reading and participating in the discussion threads" (Joanna). There is a strong sense of belonging to a learning community, of students feeling connected to and supported by their peers and tutors, and finding courage in their own voices. "I'm a different person now. I feel now that I have something to say" (Melissa).

Finding personal strength and perseverance

The idea that personal determination, or grit, is the major factor for completing the unit successfully has emerged strongly from this study. All of the successful students who participated in the research emphasise the importance of determination. The comments of students echo each other: "If I wasn't determined to study, it simply wasn't going to happen" (Joanna); "This is what drives me the most. Determination to do my best" (Lina); "That was my main motivator. That was my determination to finish the unit" (Amanda); and "Determination is the one most important aspect of getting me through online study" (Melissa). Grit is especially important for students battling with health issues. Christiana feels she could not have completed the unit without it.

"I was and still am suffering from what is sometimes called brain fog, and a lack of motivation due to my illnesses which makes it easy to just want to throw the towel in, but that determination helps drive you through the bad days" (Christiana).

Discovering the personal strength and perseverance to finish the unit seems to be one of the most beneficial outcomes for students. In her reflective journal Amanda writes:

“my life has followed a pattern of allowing difficulties or mistakes to be translated into failure and lack of self-worth. This course has proven to be vital ...in changing that...despite any setbacks I might face in the future. It’s a lot easier now to see that my weaknesses don’t automatically cancel out any strengths that I have” (Amanda).

Perspectives of non-completers

Although there is some uncertainty as to how to accurately measure attrition for online students, it is substantial and cannot be dismissed. While my study concentrates primarily on successful students, two responses came from non-completers which may give a glimpse into another side of the story behind the screens. It is clear that both these students feel let down by their experiences but also that the circumstances leading to non-completion were beyond the scope of the university’s control. Elise is bedridden after a number of strokes but had always had a sharp intellect. After she was given a second hand iPad, she decided to enrol in ATU100 and start a university degree. Unfortunately, there is a sense of confusion here about online study produced primarily from inadequate technology, and unrealistic expectations. Georgiana is a non-completing student who gave permission to use her email responses although she declined to complete the survey or be interviewed. She makes it clear that her reasons for withdrawing were “mostly personal” and not related to the nature of online study, but she was “not eager to discuss” them (Georgiana). However, a sense of personal injury is expressed regarding the OUA administrative process surrounding her withdrawal. “...I feel punished and completely inadequate” (Georgiana). It seems that not completing the unit may have a strong negative impact on the students’ sense of self-worth.

Conclusion

Current Australian higher education policies are creating teaching and learning spaces and experiences which are very different to the traditional university model. The policy-related trends of widening student participation and flexible online delivery conflate to provide the opportunity of a university education to a large and diverse ‘non-traditional’ cohort of students who would otherwise be excluded, creating a significant equity pathway. Findings from qualitative data from students who had completed the online case unit (ATU100) through Open Universities Australia indicate that the availability of online university study offers a gateway to personal transformation, as students’ self-identities expand to include their higher education success and incorporate new-found strength, personal confidence and belief in their own capabilities. Cautions in the literature regarding the challenges particular to this cohort, such as a fragile self-belief, lack of belonging and technical barriers (Yorke and Longden, 2004; Berger, 2000; McInnes and James 2004; Bach et al., 2007), appear to be surmountable for the majority of fully participating students. Attrition figures for online courses can be falsely inflated when including all those who enrol, as a significant proportion appear to have little intention of undertaking a degree. The reasons for this are difficult to ascertain as these students may be the least likely to participate in research. Responses from two non-completing students suggest that having to withdraw is extremely disheartening, but also show that external circumstances impacting the decision may be beyond anyone’s control. In the main,

students who respond to research invitations are likely to be among the most motivated but statistics from the unit Learning Management Site indicate that their positive experiences, as reported in this paper, may be widely shared. Online learning, therefore, plays an important role in furthering the public good by effectively facilitating access to a tertiary education for 'non-traditional' students.

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