# Exploring Student-Centered Initiatives in Virtual and Asynchronous Post-secondary Graduate Programs

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**Abstract**

As post-secondary education continues to evolve in response to diverse learners, graduate post-secondary programs have embraced virtual and asynchronous learning environments. This paper investigates the implementation and impact of student-centered initiatives within these contexts within online learning communities at the graduate post-secondary level. Educational institutions face challenges and opportunities posed by online learning environments including potential barriers to learning related to engagement, digital literacy, geographical considerations of attending students, student expectations, student motivation, and faculty training as well as retention. Informed through the lens of social justice in education, this work explores a range of student-centered strategies and their effectiveness in promoting student success. The information shared contributes to the growing body of literature on student-centered learning in virtual settings and offers valuable insights for educators, program administrators, and policymakers seeking to optimize the graduate experience. These initiatives are intended to have a broad positive impact on student supports and experience of a post-pandemic society as students choose to access or remain in the online learning environment.

Keywords: Graduate Programs, Student-Centered Initiatives, Online Higher Education, Student Success, Synchronous Delivery, Asynchronous Delivery, Embedded Supports

**Introduction**

The theoretical foundations and practical applications of student-centered learning and its applicability to virtual education warrant scrutiny to determine the course of action for increased student-facing initiatives. Examination of various pre-existing and proposed initiatives that provide student-facing opportunities aims to increase connections, community, and collaborative processes within the institution. Furthermore, the findings may be considered an evaluation of the impact of student-centered initiatives on critical outcomes such as student engagement, scholastic achievements, and the development of program-specific skills competencies. Essential elements of online education include strategies to promote student engagement, the development of a social presence, and the creation of virtual communities (Brown & Wilson, 2016). Virtual and asynchronous/synchronous learning environments pose challenges and opportunities including observed barriers to learning related to student motivation and engagement, accessibility, digital literacy, and faculty support/retention.

Guided by the Inclusive Student Services Process Model (Floyd and Casey-Powell, 2004) hereby referred to as "ISSPM", this paper looks to research outcomes and research based on educational institutions that strive to build student connections in an online learning platform. From admission to alumni status, students attending non-traditional learning environments require different options to address their reported demands for services that closely mirror traditional learning experiences while still experiencing the benefits of an online program. As Rumble (2000) highlights, students are "increasingly acting as consumers in their relations with universities, and it is in the service industries that most of the really good thinking about customer care has gone on" (para. 2). Most importantly, evidence-based practise of such strategies should include evaluative measures that consider the student experience.

The concept of student support and evaluative outcomes has been largely ignored in research supports (Rumble, 2000) as highlighted by Watson's (2000) brief section on student satisfaction and student opinion. This article aims to overcome the shortcomings of previous research by exploring the following research question: What types of support strategies and interventions are effective for online students at various transitions of the learning process and how can those stages be best defined for current online learners?

**Student Experience Through the Lens of the ISSPM Model**

Research suggests that student-centered initiatives, when thoughtfully designed and implemented, have the potential to enhance the quality of education in virtual and asynchronous graduate counselling programs. They foster a sense of autonomy, self-efficacy, and community among students, aligning with the principles of adult learning theory. However, successful adoption requires a shift in pedagogical paradigms, ongoing faculty development, and robust technological infrastructure. Brindley (2014) notes that distance learners are expected to manage multiple roles including effective peer collaboration, create learning networks, plan academic programs, and set study schedules. In addition, these tasks are engaged alongside work and family responsibilities. A challenge of online learning programs is to understand the readiness of online learners prior to attending the graduate level programs (Hoang et al., 2022), where student supports can be embedded (Rumble, 2000), and evaluative measures of strategy efficacy often lacking in the online post-secondary community.

The very points of transition for online post-secondary students are not well-supported in research. This shift in a student's flow through the master's and doctorate-level programming shows a demand for student adjustment as well as multi-faceted touch points that require consideration (Maunder et al., 2013). These touch points can be determined into five key areas as supported by the Inclusive Student Services Process Model (Floyd and Casey-Powell, 2004), guiding future support strategies and interventions that may be more successful for a consumer-centric population of students at the graduate level. These five areas as based on the model include 1) Student Intake; 2) Student Interventions; 3) Student Supports; 4) Student Transitions; and 5) Measurement (Floyd and Casey-Powell, 2004).

**Student Intake**

Millán et al. (2023) address the early conceptualization of student readiness by addressing digital readiness and the ability to competently navigate online learning management systems including Blackboard, Canvas, and Moodle. While current research supports accessible course materials, effective instructional design, and meaningful use of technology, there exists an increased recognition of aspects including academic and social supports, financial constraints, and student motivation as well as engagement (Samuel and Burger, 2020). A comprehensive student intake enriches the experiences and outcomes not only technical and academic supports; readiness for online learning addresses the benefits of targeted support services (Nichols, 2010). The level of preparedness plays a crucial role in determining the success of applications in the online learning environment, as noted by Hung et al. (2010), Johnson et al. (2008), and Yeh (2010). The online learning readiness (OLR) theoretical framework of Hung et al. (2010) highlights the need to improve various facets of the online learning experience and precipitating factors, including dimensions of supportive leadership as noted by Cowan (2013), prior online learning experience, self-directed use of technology, and student attitudes towards online learning (Hung et al., 2010). Furthermore, the psychosocial stressors of the student prior to the start of online learning lack current research and instead, research tends to consistently present with a focus on technology usage and self-efficacy.

Early indications of online learning challenges addressed by Warner, Christie, and Choy (1998) focused on the Australian vocational education and training sector. Their definition included three key components: students' inclination toward online delivery over traditional classroom methods, their comfort and proficiency in using electronic communication tools for learning, and their confidence and skill in navigating Internet and computer-mediated online learning environments. More recently, Parasuraman (2000) addressed the varying approaches to online learning readiness and the direct connection between the psychological state of the student. As noted in Hoang (2022), Darab and Montazer (2011) developed a multi-dimensional model of assessment addressing readiness dimensions: communication network readiness, equipment readiness, security readiness, financial readiness, human resources readiness, support and supervision and coordination readiness, laws and regulations readiness, standards readiness, and content readiness. Purnell et al's (2016) work adds consideration to changing student demographics, as novice learners are more at-risk than experienced learners. In addition, Kear (2016) identifies student misconceptions about course difficulty and skills necessary for success. These skills connect to Darab and Montazer's (2011) work as these skills also include the motivation of the student, psychosocial factors such as natural supports and family as well as work obligations, and the true financial costs associated with online learning.

While online learning research is limited, Hoang's (2022) research acknowledges the continued challenges of successful student intake supports. A key limitation to the outcomes of the study involves student self-reporting as online learning perceptions may skew results. Qualitative instruments, including addressing not only stressors but also protective factors, will be key to improving student intake services that provide wraparound supports from a comprehensive and data-driven perspective. Ultimately, educational institutions must consider the pre-learner's skillsets, responsibilities, protective factors, and stressors and instruments including online student readiness are important to address these facets. Britto & Rush's (2013) work reminds educational post-secondary communities that "not all students are prepared to take courses online" (p. 31). Despite advances in student supports, online educational programs continue to be challenged to provide appropriate interventions to students presenting with a wide range of needs.

## Student Interventions

The identification of the needs of students from the view of academic capacity, psychosocial stressors, natural support systems, motivation and engagement, as well as technological skills is key to student outcomes and ultimately, student attrition. Netanda et al. (2017) highlight the reduction of transactional distance resulting in increased student success and the development of a supportive framework. Results identify that supports offer online learners a multitude of benefits including greater academic success and increased retention. While evaluative measures for outcomes of student interventions have largely been self-reporting (Hoang, 2022), future statistical examination of provisions will support institutions to address the level of interventions accessible by online learners and the engagement by learners to access such services. Kuo and Belland (2016) highlight that student satisfaction is directly linked to their performance as students. However, the interaction between learners and content was not influenced by factors such as the individual student characteristics or the specific course being studied. This could imply that the content itself, or perhaps other external factors, played a more significant role in shaping the interaction dynamics.

In the realm of online education, it is imperative to provide students with comprehensive support that extends beyond academic instruction to encompass the management of external responsibilities and commitments (Whitelock et al., 2015). Whitelock et al. (2015) underscores the significance of recognizing and accommodating the workload of online learners who juggle employment and family obligations. The confluence of assignments with particularly demanding periods in the lives of online students can lead to significant overload, potentially resulting in students falling behind. Therefore, it is unwise to presume that students consistently adhere to their study schedules. These stressors that are consistent with the demographic of the online student as a later-stage adult with additional commitments and responsibilities should be carefully considered.

## Student Supports

While educational institutions typically focus supports on academic challenges including writing and communication skills, technological supports, and the provision of assistive technology for learners who benefit from accommodations, more recent studies including Kumar and Coe, (2017) have addressed "socio-emotional supports" (p. 15). Peer supports, including mentoring as well as the connectivity of peers in a seemingly isolated arena of online learning, is instrumental in the network of student supports. Boyle et al. (2010) address

the simplicity of peer mentoring as a low-cost strategy that can be embedded into the learning curriculum.

The development of skills is another facet that online learning environments tend to face as a key challenge with student success and eventually, attrition. Increased student supports may include the socio-emotional perspective that provides enhancement of student experience through socialization opportunities with their peers in addition to building academic skillsets. Increased reports of belonging, as addressed by Boyle (2010), have been reported in addition to students reporting increased motivation, engagement with their instructor or professor, improved study skills, and increased comfort with sharing psychosocial stressors including feelings surrounding academic workload, family obligation, employment challenges, and financial constraints.

A comprehensive student support system has shown an impact on student success. Britto & Rush (2013) provide guidance on the comprehensive support system that positively affected student experience and ultimately, improved student retention rates. The comparative study could easily be absorbed into consideration for future programming in other online institutions, as utility and efficacy were examined with planned future evaluations. A sense of belonging, as adopted by Lee & Choi (2011) suggests that personal support interventions in addition to technological and academic interventions are effective in combatting student dissatisfaction and eventually, student withdrawal (Anderson, 2003; La Padula, 2003). In this supportive phase embedded in online learning environments, early intervention for learners with challenges in addition to the identification of at-promise students are key for student experience, positive engagements during the program, student attrition, and net promotion of the institution after program completion.

**Student Transitions**

Key touch points of student transition in the online community, as identified by the Inclusive Student Services Process Model (Floyd and Casey-Powell, 2004) include acceptance to the online learning program, the transition between the stages of learning, and ultimately the transition to the labour/employment market. Recognition of the changing expectations between courses and even years of study suggests that students continue to be required to adapt throughout their program, regardless of the experience they brought to the online learning environment as a student or their motivation to fully participate in the student experience (Maunder et al., 2013). A key challenge in research regarding student experience and particularly, the transitional phases in the student's journey, include that research has focused only on the first year of student transitions (Tett, 2000).

The expectations and interpretations of student experience during the transition phases are affected by internal images (Maunder et al., 2013). Negotiating the transitions throughout the educational program includes the aspects of Darab and Montazer's (2011) work of addressing support available to online learners. Also consistent with Darab and Montazer (2011), Maudner et al. (2013) acknowledges the inclusion of authentic student voice in efforts to provide increased research of service provision outcomes. By providing students with direct engagement in the key touch points of their transitions experienced in the online learning community, continued active dialogue between leadership, faculty, and students can increase the reliability of data collection for transition. This student-led approach offers a distinctive and authentic perspective on student life. It underscores the significance of collaborative

efforts between staff and students in enhancing comprehension of educational matters and fostering transformative change (Little, 2011).

**Measurement and Evaluation**

Effective student supports and interventions can only be determined as such with comprehensive and evidence-based data. However, Gibbs et al. (2006) suggest that there exists a lack of such a system to evaluate the offerings to online learners. Instead, institutions rely on student self-reporting instruments; reliability and validity may be affected by a multitude of factors including the student's internal perception of their experience regardless of the offerings of their program. At this touchpoint of moving students to employment markets, Zuhairi et al. (2019) suggest that alumni of online learning programs are valuable resources. Feedback, involving alumni in projects, developing an alumni network, and updating past graduates on recent updates in the organization can be positive contributors to measurement. Furthermore, mechanisms of assessment can include surveys by students and faculty, staff performance assessments and appraisals, tutor performance evaluations, and alumni surveys (Zahairi, 2019).

A general lack of empirical evidence in the measurement and evaluation phase of the Inclusive Student Services Process Model (Floyd and Casey-Powell, 2004) suggests that instruments relied upon are self-reports completed by students transitioning to alumni. The authors consider the exploration of an online student services self-assessment tool that allows educators to evaluate areas of support. Reliability is questionable; Maunder et al. (2013) identify that student feedback at this point is individual and personal. Establishing student identity at this phase with the additional stressors of changing expectations from student online learner to the workforce adds additional pressures that may affect the student experience and the very perception of that experience.

**Conclusion**

There is a growing body of literature on student-centered learning in virtual settings that offers valuable insights for educators, program administrators, and policymakers seeking to optimize the graduate counselling experience. The challenges lie in multiple facets of the student experience, including the expectations of students prior to entering the online learning community, academic and non-academic challenges, interventions provided, and measurement and evaluation of supports. Keegan (2003) suggests that online learning programs are further challenged by the determination of support services in two categories: learner support and learning support (p. 1-2). This underscores the importance of prioritizing student agency and engagement in the design and delivery of virtual post-secondary education, acknowledging the benefits for learners in the online learning environments and ultimately shaping the future of counselling/psychology education and practice.

Limitations must be acknowledged as online programs facilitated by post-secondary learning institutions address student experience and success. These include embracing methodology that has been consistently successful prior to the increased popularity of online learning (i.e. peer mentoring), the fallibility of the reported student experience in the single form of student self-reporting, and the recognition of academic learning versus the needs of the learner. Through the lens of the Inclusive Student Services Process Model presented by the work of Floyd & Casey-Powell (2004), further research into the methodologies surrounding the student experience from initial phases of admissions to alumni for the online learner will

improve the understanding of the current processes and add to the understanding of these complex educational issues in a unique virtual learning environment.

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