

# Supporting academic staff in new learning contexts

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A specialist support team is working with academics to design online learning experiences for Open Universities Australia. Delivery to a cohort of students with needs and backgrounds different from traditional university students, and with timeframes and administrative structures that often conflict with familiar practice, raises challenges beyond those normally faced in online education. This poster describes some of the solutions that have been put in place and outlines a framework for an ongoing evaluative study.

Keywords: online learning, Open Universities Australia, academic support

## Introduction

This poster presentation examines the contributions of an academic teaching and learning support team in the delivery of business education through Open Universities Australia (OUA). Changing academic and administrative contexts, new modes of delivery and diverse student cohorts require new approaches to teaching, learning and management. Academic and support staff must work in new ways and devise new resources for simultaneous delivery into on-campus and distance or online OUA student contexts. The role of the support team is to assist with technical aspects of resource development as well as with professional development for academics in both the design and delivery of online learning.

## Exploratory study

The study covers support for four groups of academics from different discipline areas within the Business Portfolio. Two groups provide suites of single subjects towards undergraduate degrees. One of these has been delivered through OUA for many years and moved from paper based to online resources in 2003, while the other is involved in a major expansion of OUA provision in 2007. As well as these, there are two postgraduate areas that have moved into OUA delivery in 2007. The support team works with all four areas, enabling the sharing of ideas and contributing to resource and staff development. Some preliminary evaluation of these activities has recently been conducted, and several areas identified for further investigation.

## Resource development

The support team has provided a number of specific resources common to the different discipline areas for OUA delivery:

- An Orientation CD is provided to all students, containing administrative information, FAQs, instructions for using the online materials, and a series of study skills modules. A preliminary evaluation survey carried out in mid 2007 revealed that over 80% of respondents used the CD more than once. Positive feedback was received on the layout, navigation and content – however, a more detailed evaluation on specific sections of the CD is called for.
- A common look and feel for all subjects intends to make navigation easier for students, and to engender a sense of belonging to a particular suite of subjects. However, OUA students typically take subjects from a number of providers, each with quite different content provision. Future investigation will seek feedback on the value of common layout and navigation, particularly comparing responses from undergraduate students (taking subjects from providers other than RMIT) with those of postgraduate students (who are more likely to be taking subjects from only one provider).
- Audio/video segments from academic staff are used to provide an overview of various aspects of the subject: introduction, topic overviews, and assessment tips. There is significant disparity between the delivery styles used by individual academics, and the impact of these styles on student perceptions (and the perceived value of such human contact) requires further investigation.

## Staff development

Anecdotal evidence suggests that academic staff face several challenges adapting to the requirements of OUA delivery. In particular, they often perceive this as extra workload on top of their 'real' teaching. OUA subjects are also delivered over shorter timeframes than traditional semesters, and the extra requirements of preparation and marking can be seen as a disruption to normal work patterns. Many academics respond to these pressures by simply using their existing face-to-face materials and methods with the online students. However, Sheeley (2006) argues that reverting to these traditional teaching practices can undermine the potential for greater transformation and interactivity in online education. Lecturers subsequently need encouragement and assistance to reconceptualise the content to enable genuine online engagement from the students.

An aspect of online teaching that is well supported by evidence is the need to set up online discussions and respond to student postings on a regular basis. In OUA student satisfaction surveys for the first undergraduate study period of 2007, over 20% of the free text responses to the question "What were the best features of this unit?" mentioned discussion boards and/or prompt feedback from the instructor. An academic support group can offer professional development in how to teach online, and there are numerous resources available, dating back to Salmon's (2000) seminal work on e-moderating. A question to be asked is: what is the best way to disseminate this information? We can employ formal seminars, one-on-one conversations, meetings with teams of online facilitators, mentoring of newcomers by "old hands", or a combination of strategies. What is the balance of support required, between technical skills in using an online learning management system, and the soft skills of effectively communicating online?

## Conclusion

A large-scale research study in 2008 will investigate all aspects of the RMIT Business Portfolio's involvement with OUA, evaluating current practice from the point of view of administration, academic content provision and academic support services. Student responses to particular online provisions such as audio/video introductions and study skills modules will be explored, and we will investigate different models of providing support to academic teams in online delivery to determine efficient ways of encouraging staff to provide the engagement and feedback that students consider to be important. We will also investigate different models of managing teaching and learning practice across diverse student cohorts and delivery modes. This evaluation will inform future practice, policy, support mechanisms and staff development, with the overarching goal improving student learning outcomes.

## References

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