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The Future is Connection:

Collaboration, Creativity and Compassion in a Digital Society

Looking forward by looking back: A decade of learning, research, reflection, and collective growth in early online education

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In 2016, Monash University introduced the Graduate Diploma of Psychology (Advanced; GDPA), a fully online fourth-year psychology program delivered in block mode. One of the earliest programs of its kind in Australia, the GDPA represented a significant innovation at a time when online education was still gaining acceptance. As the GDPA marks its 10th anniversary, this symposium brings together members of the original team and newer colleagues to reflect on developing and delivering online education. As online education has moved from novel innovation to mainstream delivery, what lessons remain relevant for contemporary online learning and teaching? Drawing on reflections, case studies and research framed by Community of Inquiry (Garrison et al., 2000) and Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000), the symposium explores how educators have fostered connection, wellbeing, autonomy and competence in fully online learning environments. Through a decade of experience across multiple institutions, we consider the opportunities and challenges of educational innovation, and how these insights can inform the future of digital learning and teaching.

Keywords: Digital pedagogy, student experience, educational innovation, reflection, community

Area of focus

While online education is now a central feature of higher education, the landscape in which it operates has changed substantially, bringing new challenges around scale, student expectations, technology, assessment, connection and sustainability. By sharing perspectives across institutions and career stages, the panel will explore how insights from early online education can inform current and future approaches to digital learning and teaching.

Summary of ideas to be explored

The panel will draw on diverse perspectives, reflective accounts and research findings grounded in lived experience to explore the following ideas:

- As AI and emerging technologies disrupt higher education, what challenges and opportunities are there in creating flexible learning while maintaining the human connection that underpins effective learning?
- How can universities intentionally embed student wellbeing into curriculum design for fully online learning environments, and what does best practice look like?
- How can education-focused academics build momentum in practice-based research while balancing competing priorities?
- What happens when educational innovation moves from novel to mainstream, and what lessons can early online psychology education offer future practice?
- How have contemporary pressures shaped online learning, and changed learning and assessment experiences for both students and educators?
- With demand for online education continuing to grow, how can educators implement authentic competency-based assessments?

Names of proposed panel members and the views they represent

Dr Lauren Shaw, James Cook University. Academic Head, Psychology, James Cook University. An early challenge in the GDPA was managing increased instances of aggressive student communications, which we attributed to the asynchronous nature of online education. We explore how a Community of Inquiry framework to strengthen online presence mitigated this and informed strategies for building community online.

Associate Professor Stephen McKenzie, Head of Psychology, Torrens University. The GDPA needed to ensure online students received research training equivalent to on-campus peers, requiring new approaches to supervision, support, and academic connection. The resulting GDPA Online Research Portal later expanded into a university-wide research support system.

Dr Lilani Arulkadcham. Acting Director of Education (Foundational Psychology), School of Psychological Sciences, Monash University. Building on a systematic review and student focus groups, the GDPA embedded evidence-based self-care into the curriculum through the Self-Care Toolbox. Designed for the demands of online psychology study, the Toolbox provides practical wellbeing strategies, psychoeducation, and timely support throughout the program.

Dr Jen Chung. Academic Lead, Graduate Employability, Deakin University. The Monash Online Psychology Education Division (MO-PED) was established to support evidence-based development of the GDPA. Its highly cited integrative review, along with research on student wellbeing and work readiness, highlights the value of embedded, practice-based research in shaping online education.

Dr Jennifer Day. Lecturer, Psychology, Torrens University Australia. As online psychology programs continue to evolve, educators must navigate emerging Generative AI-related challenges while ensuring learning remains interactive, authentic, and supportive of student success.

Dr Christine Lewis. Course Coordinator, Master of Professional Psychology (MPP), James Cook University. There is increasing demand for online postgraduate pathways that enable registration as a psychologist. JCU's MPP is currently delivered in hybrid mode, and plans to expand fully online. This creates new challenges designing assessments that authentically evaluate practice-based competencies and skills.

Outline of the symposium format, including strategies to engage audience

The symposium will be interactive, with opportunities for audience and panellist participation through synchronous and asynchronous means. Audience engagement will be facilitated through live polling, structured discussion prompts, and opportunities for participants to share experiences and future priorities for online learning and teaching.

Details of the audience, expected outcomes, and key takeaways

This symposium will be of interest to anyone involved in online and blended education. Participants will gain insights from shared experiences and contribute to broader discussions about digital learning and teaching practice. The symposium aims to foster collaboration and collective learning among educators navigating a rapidly evolving educational landscape.

References

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