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Flexibility: Pathways to participation

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Is there room for everybody?

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Acceptable and expected living standards have been continually increasing in Australia and this has been particularly marked during the last two generations. This development is incurring a greater financial input from any student living independently. Often mature age students have families and financial obligations. Students' time is taken up with family, work, financial concerns, social obligations, travel and religion in addition to their study. Universities are competing for students' time in a period when their commitments are escalating and life is far busier than it was even one generation ago. With ever increasing demands on students' time, tertiary education institutes need to find effective ways of supporting their students, both on campus and online. Acknowledgment of the constant and continual change in students' lifestyles and seeking and implementing effective methods of connecting with and supporting students can improve the student experience.

The University of Southern Queensland (USQ) is a regional university comprised of four campuses. Each campus has a core USQ identity with centralised systems and processes in place however each also has its own individual character and the interaction between students, support staff and academics at each campus is influenced by its individual culture and style. USQ's Tertiary Preparation Program (TPP) is a bridging program designed to enable people to acquire essential prerequisite knowledge and skills required for success in undergraduate study. The program consists of courses designed to develop academic writing, computing and general study skills and to build students' confidence to undertake further studies. Within the program students may also study other specialised courses to prepare for the particular degree they intend to complete. Upon successful completion of the program, which can be achieved in as short a time as one semester, students are guaranteed entry into an undergraduate program at the USQ. This paper describes some of the strategies used in the program.

TPP has multi modal forms of delivery including online, distance and on campus. The on campus student experience is necessarily different from the experience of students studying in a distance or online mode and could be seen as 'extra support'. Finding a way to include external or online students and providing them with an equivalent experience is a challenge faced by all four campuses. It is important to develop ways of meeting the needs all students studying in the different modes. It is also important for facilitators to encourage learning relationships with and between students in order to engage them and add value to their learning experience.

Increasingly diverse cohorts mean that more students are managing more commitments and demands in their daily lives which in turn leads to tertiary institutions having to

work harder and smarter to provide a learning experience meaningful enough that students consider it worth the commitment and effort. A student who is working full time in his field of study made a suggestion regarding the course. When it was suggested to him that he put his comment in the course evaluation, he replied, "I am flat out with work, study, family and dogs. Any time I have over I spend with my wife and the dogs. I don't have time to fill in the evaluation. I just want to get the degree finished as soon as possible". For this student, although completing tertiary study was worth the effort, his perception was that after work and study there was little time left for anything else.

USQ has a high ratio of mature aged students compared to other Australian universities (Hobsons, 2013). With this cohort come unique challenges. The average age of the students at USQ is 28 (USQ Annual Report, 2012) and many of these students have young families, and mortgages or rents which require financial input. Students who have been out in the workforce for a period of time have lifestyles which require maintenance and they are often understandably unwilling to significantly lower their standard of living for the duration of their tertiary studies although Ben Phillips, principal research fellow for the National Centre for Social and Economic Modelling (as cited in Negus, 2013, para. 11) points out that: "Cost of living pressures are more related to our increased expectations and the greater demands from a modern society than the prices we pay for petrol or electricity." If the student has a dependent family, a lowering of their living standard affects more than just one person and many students are unwilling to see their children's standard of living being adversely affected.

Our students and their lives outside of University

Students increasingly have to balance paid work and family responsibilities with their study. "Recognising and respecting the many other demands that these students have upon them is of key importance in maximising the potential for mature learners to fully engage with the learning community" (O'Shea & Stone, 2011, p. 286). This is demonstrated by the following student experience. For the student who lives out of town, has a family and a demanding job, the only time for study is at night and in the early mornings which does not prove successful as they are overtired and unable to concentrate. As well, the entire family has sporting commitments which involve travel and time during the week and on weekends. After the student began study a series of family and work events occurred which impacted on their ability to study effectively. This has forced the student to seriously reconsider their time commitments and they are considering postponing future study until there are fewer demands on their time and energy. According to Bedford (2009) one of the most commonly reported reason for disengaging from study was outside demands on time.

Many students are parents who are responsible for young children. Increasingly, a larger number of young children are in extracurricular activities. "In the 12 months leading to April 2009, almost two-thirds (63%) of children aged 5-14 years had participated in organised sport or dancing at least once" (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2012). The participation rate was highest in children aged from 5-11 years (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2012). The children's involvement in extracurricular activities demands time both after school and on the weekend and often requires a parent to transport them to these. Weekend sporting fixtures often take place an hour or so car ride from home and transport to, watching the match and transport back home can take more than a few

hours. Multiply the time needed by the number of children the student has, and this can significantly eat into the student's 'free' time available for study.

The lives and needs of many students have changed and many of them have to spend more hours in employment than previously (Mubarak, Rohde & Pakulski, 2009). Many students are working in jobs where they have little influence over the number of hours they have to work and this has a direct correlation with the amount of quality time they can put into study. A number of students are dependent on paid employment in jobs which are in the lower income brackets. These include positions in major supermarkets, national retailers, the construction industry, petrol stations and international fast food chains (Michael, 2013). Students often have to work overtime and extra shifts to cover colleagues who are on sick or recreational leave. This leads to diminished study time for the enrolled students. Some of the students would like to work fewer hours however this request is often denied by the employer. Some students are too afraid to even inform their employer that they are studying for fear of losing their employment. An on campus student began studying the course when there was no overtime at his workplace. During the course this changed and he has recently completed a week of twelve hour shifts for which he only received one day's notice. This week occurred during a week when two major assignments were due. He has requested extensions on the assignments in an effort to complete them.

Ways of actively engaging students online

There is an active student social forum in the *Studying to Succeed* course where students can post queries relating to the course and either another student or a staff member answers them. One staff member assumes the majority of the responsibility of answering queries so that the forum maintains the same voice and students have the opportunity to build a rapport with the staff member. Soong, Chan, Chua and Loh explain that:

> Because learning is a social process (Lave and Wenger, 1991, Resnick, 1989 and Vygotsky, 1978), the more interactions we expose the students to, the more opportunities they have to learn. As such, these on-line course resources may be seen to play a *mediating* role, allowing for an *alternative* channel for collaboration among students. In addition, Bellamy (1996) reported that learning is best when collaboration involves people with all levels of expertise. The use of on-line resources such as discussion forums definitely allow for this kind of "mixed" collaboration. (2001, p. 107)

To complement the effort to establish an open channel of communication with distance students, a video introducing the social forum and the main respondent was made at the beginning of the course. In a bid to make the forum more personalised this was also emailed to all the students enrolled in the course so that they had a face and voice to connect with. Another video was made about six weeks into the course and a final one towards the end.

The social forum is an active channel of communication where students ask many questions. After a few people introduce themselves on the forum at the beginning of the semester the students become more comfortable with this medium and activity increases. As the semester progresses the forum becomes very active and the students

build a supportive network where they ask questions about the content, (especially about upcoming assignments) as well as offer each other moral support. This was evidenced when one student was involved in a car accident and there were messages of sympathy and support offered. Students also offer each other support and encouragement when they are feeling despondent and freely give support regarding finishing and submitting upcoming assignments. Building a supportive network among their peers can help to build efficacy as they are able to encourage each other and share experiences. In addition every semester students begin a Facebook group for TPP which is their initiative and separate from the forum.

Timely responses to students' queries by staff can also contribute to the student feeling supported and willing to continue studying even when they feel daunted. When students post questions online they receive an answer a short time later. One student commented regarding an answer to a query she had:

> Thank you so much for this, i had asked family members and they didn't fully understand it, my main supporter and helper is my little sister but she was a little busy with her own university assignment to be able to help me this time round. never used the social forum before, but its a very good way to ask your question and get a swift response.

Another commented in response to a reflective question in an assignment:

> Flexible learning can rely heavily on digital communication, especially when students study online and rarely meet a lecturer 'face to face'. Furthermore social networking may increase student relationships and engagement thus helping a student to succeed in higher education.

Informal evening Blackboard sessions were begun in an attempt to further engage distance students. These were to take place between seven and eight o'clock every Thursday evening and the purpose was to provide students who were unable to attend on campus classes with an opportunity to speak informally, in real time, with a lecturer and other students about any course queries they had. "When the learner is given more choices, the instructor is increasingly required to respond and individualize rather than plan and deliver" (Collis & Moonen, 2001, p.14). This is an opportunity for distance students to make contact with their peers within a social and active learning milieu. Due to a series of unfortunate events the sessions did not begin until about a month into semester. The sessions are advertised on the student social forum either the day before or on the actual day they take place. Attendance has been constant with around three or four students attending every Thursday evening. The students are not the exact same students every week however there is a regular group of attenders with an occasional 'new face'. There is no set agenda as the informal Blackboard session is student focused and student led as they decide what they want to discuss and get advice or answers to. An eclectic range of issues are discussed which include but are not limited to questions regarding assignments, self-confidence, academic reading techniques and time management tips. Soong et al (2001) write:

> Since learning takes place in a participatory framework, not in an individual mind (Lave & Wenger, 1991), when students are passive participants in the learning process, they do not learn with understanding. It is only when students are active participants in the learning process that a deeper understanding and appreciation of

the subject-in-discussion is achieved. Given this, we *hypothesize* that if the course encourages collaboration, such that the students become active participants in the learning process, students will have higher learning and deeper discourse (i.e. resource is successful). (p. 107)

Some students who do not attend listen to the recording at a later date. This Blackboard session is held in addition to a regular almost weekly online formal Blackboard class which deals solely with the assignment that is due. Attendance at these classes is higher than attendance at the informal sessions and more students access the formal Blackboard classes later at a time that is more suitable for them. The timing of the formal Blackboard sessions which are from 5.30 – 6.30 in the evening makes it difficult for students to attend if they have small children or are still travelling home from work. Also on the StudyDesk there are weekly lectures, quizzes and helpful tips in addition to the study materials and content. Perhaps the majority of distance students do not require the additional support as there is already so much provided and the hour is just another piece of time which must be found. The Blackboard class may however, prove very beneficial to the students who do attend and if the university is going to provide online learning then some staff should be available at times when students wish to seek help and support. "Personalised learning and online study options continued to be critical for today's students and new strategies are needed to further embrace and enhance the online teaching environment, without compromising the quality of individual learning experience or outcomes" (USQ Annual Report, 2012, p. 13).

Measures to engage on campus students

Over half the enrolled students in the TPP are studying in an external or online mode (USQ TPP7120 StudyDesk, 2013). Different measures have been implemented which it is hoped will positively influence student retention and participation. Wilson (2009) argues that having a social network at university greatly helps the retention rate. Anecdotal evidence would suggest that the majority of mature age enrolled students already have established social networks comprised of pre-existing friendships and family members. These social networks, when functioning well, provide encouragement and support to the student. Having supportive social networks may also lessen the need for the student to attend on campus classes and activities or access the online services provided. Although this may be the case for some students there will be those who benefit from an online social network.

In addition to support from staff, students also need support from their family and social network if they are going to succeed at university. One on campus student who has family and financial commitments takes their commitments and responsibilities very seriously and struggles to find time and sometimes motivation to complete course work. Their end goal of studying is improved employability but sometimes the student feels their family does not understand how important study is, not just for their own future, but for the family's future. In an attempt to balance their work, family and study commitments the student has requested to extend their study into the next semester. "Lack of family support can compromise the success of the mature-age learner who re-engages with study" (Willans & Seary, 2011, p. 11). Tertiary study, particularly for "first in family" students can sometimes be an alien concept for both the student and their family network (Taylor, 2007). To be a successful student requires resiliency and self-efficacy (Lane, Lane & Kyprianou, 2004; Willans & Seary, 2011) from the student

and continued ongoing support from the student's closest support network. Glogowska, Young and Lockyer (2007) found that support from family, social networks and other students were contributing factors to students staying in study and in particular feeling a part of the student cohort. On the Springfield campus an on campus barbeque was organised for Saturday in Week three with two factors in mind. One was to use it to acquaint the student's family and friends with the university campus and demystify where their family member was disappearing to at least one day a week. The other reason was to encourage students to mingle in an informal milieu and hopefully increase their friendship network. Out of nine students who had expressed an interest in attending the week before, a total of two students turned up. One student arrived with three children and a husband and the other student came with only her husband. After lunch the students and families were given a campus tour. Later one of the students reported that she thought the barbeque and campus visit was very beneficial in helping her children understand where her time is being taken up. They are now much more cooperative when she wants to spend some quiet time studying.

Continuing changes in society and what is considered acceptable contributes to the increasing "busyness" of students' lives. Determined working hours, housekeeping, family commitments, travel arrangements and study all need to be slotted into the 168 hours that comprise a week. Students' lives, even before they include study, are very full, particularly if there are family, work, sporting, social and religious commitments. Rises in the accepted standard of living have seen an increase in the number of hours people are willing to work in order to maintain their lifestyle. Students, both current and potential, are often unable to say no to overtime and are also hesitant to work fewer hours. Often there are two reasons for this. One is; less income would see a drop in their standard of living and the other is a fear of losing their jobs. Australia has experienced a relatively rapid rise in the standard of living which has had a ripple effect through many layers of society and has led to a change in what is widely perceived as acceptable regarding living standards. If there is to be room for everyone it is important that tertiary institutions acknowledge the changes in culture and society and instigate corresponding changes in their programs in an effort to better meet the needs of these diverse cohorts. Continual advances in technology have enabled many tertiary institutions to reach a wider range of students than previously. As a result many tertiary institutions have instigated changes in how students can access course materials. Perhaps tertiary institutions should further consider meeting the students on their 'own turf' which may further enable students to succeed. Measures could include flexible start and finish dates and greater access to staff when the students have quality free time to study.

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