

**Bridging the online gap in enabling education:
Counteracting the disconnect**

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The University Preparation Course (UniPrep) at Edith Cowan University (ECU) in Perth, Western Australia, provides one of Australia's largest alternative-entry programs for future undergraduate students, who do not yet have the confidence or qualifications required for direct entry to university. This cohort is often new to university expectations, may have had past negative learning experiences, limited opportunity to engage meaningfully with post-secondary education or are returning to higher education after a significant time lapse. Some students opt to complete UniPrep to maximise their future study success and efficacy. Both on-campus and online flexible delivery modes are offered. Despite on-going success in the on-campus mode, attrition rates among online learners are significantly higher than on-campus rates. For this reason the online delivery mode became a focus for the UniPrep team.

This paper reports on the extension of ECU's UniPrep Curriculum Enabling Model, based on cohesion, coherence and connectedness, to the online environment to include an engaging, relevant curriculum, awareness of and timely access to ECU support services and most importantly, strategies to develop a sense of belonging, competence and confidence. These practical strategies extended the culture of care and community provided in the on-campus mode to the online learners and were used in conjunction with a targeted approach to students at educational risk. Evidence from the student perspective suggests these strategies are beginning to bridge the gap for these enabling course students by counteracting the disconnect they often feel, in an online environment.

Introduction

Enabling education has become of critical importance to universities in delivering alternative entry pathways for students from diverse and disadvantaged backgrounds. This importance is evidenced at a federal level with 34 Australian universities receiving funding for enabling courses (Bookallil & Rolf, 2016) in order to help meet the Australian national target of 20% of low socio-economic status (SES) background enrolments and 40% of 25-34 year olds attaining a Bachelor level qualification by 2020 (DEEWR, 2008, p.12). A key role for enabling programs is to equip students with skills and understandings and introduce them to academic culture, thus facilitating the transition to university. The literature supports the assertion that enabling programs do prepare students well for Higher Education studies and those that continue to undergraduate study persist and perform as well as students from other entry pathways (Cantwell, Archer & Bourke, 2001; Klinger & Tranter, 2009). James (2013) found that students progressing to Bachelor degrees have success commensurate with school leavers with tertiary entry rankings in the 70 percentile. While transition to and completion of undergraduate study may be the ultimate indicator of success, there are many other implied aims suggested in the literature, such as encouraging students who have often had unsuccessful educational experiences to develop both a desire and capacity to achieve (Hodges, Bedford, Hartley, Klinger, Murray, O'Rourke, & Schofield, 2013), significant personal growth in 'identity and insight' experienced by mature age students (Cantwell & Mulhearn, 1997; Cullity, 2006) along with personal transformation for those that persist (Willans & Seary, 2011). Key to this transformation is the building of academic confidence. Crawford (2014) suggests that enabling programs as a transition strategy and social inclusion practice have multilayered flow on effects into degrees benefiting both other students but also family, friends and community (p.15).

This widening of participation has been accompanied by a significant increase in delivery of online and flexible learning (Baker, 2010). Many benefits of online learning are reported in the literature, such as time and location flexibility, self-paced learning, increasingly collaborative learning environments and an abundance of learning materials (Chatterjee & Moore, 2009; Rovai, 2003). Despite the significant improvements in interactivity, collaboration and delivery in

online education (Zhang & Nunamaker, 2003), the attrition rates among online learners are still significantly higher than on-campus rates (Carr, 2000; Ryan, 2001). The purpose of this paper is not to explain this attrition, as there has been much literature devoted to this (Nash, 2008), but to report on positively received strategies, implemented by the ECU UniPrep team to improve the persistence of online learners.

Context

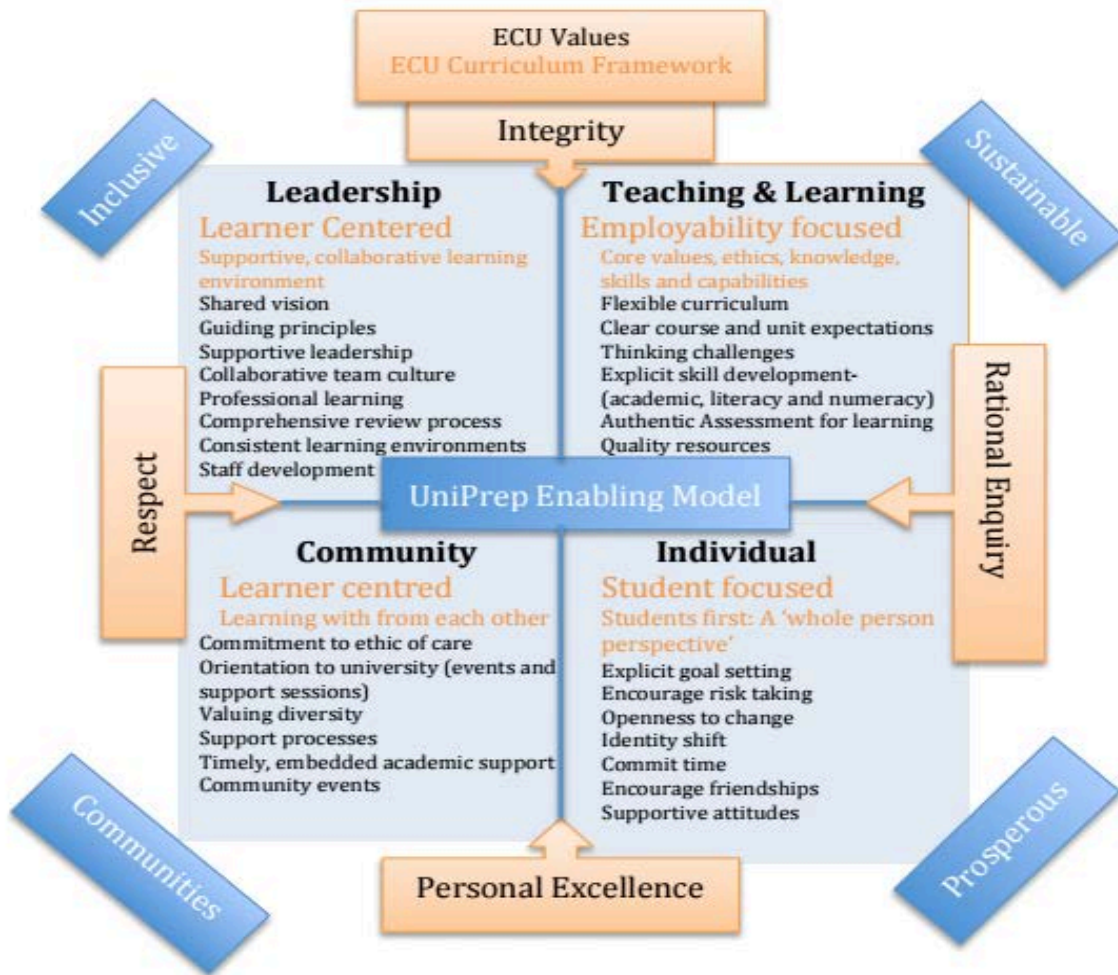
The ECU UniPrep, is a one semester full-time equivalent program, delivered via on-campus, online, mixed modes and a compacted summer school. In 2015, UniPrep had enrolments across the year of over 2,000 students. Almost 30% of these enrolments were online or mixed mode delivery students. In 2012, the UniPrep enabling curriculum was redeveloped with a shared staff vision, innovative, relevant curriculum and contemporary, evidence-based enabling pedagogy (Sharp, O'Rourke, Lane, & Hays, 2014). A priority was the development of a collaborative culture with a 'students first' focus, student-centred teaching and learning, (Kift, Nelson, & Clarke, 2010) with a willingness to explore student strengths, rather than deficits. Even with large numbers, retention and transition rates in UniPrep were higher when compared to other Australian university enabling courses (Hodges, et al., 2013).

The literature acknowledges that higher online dropout rates are expected. Bookallil & Rolf's (2016) study of the comparison of distance education to internal study concluded that while online study improves access to enabling programs, it does not improve completions or articulations to undergraduate study. Simpson (2004) ascribes the low student retention rates and higher drop out occurring in online environments to the complexity of self-managed learning and the online delivery mode itself. Learners in enabling education are often first in family and have traditionally not succeeded in past educational experiences. Limited experience of university expectations and protocols, a lack of confidence in online learning systems, motivation, time pressures and the multiplicity of life events all impact on the capacity of students to cope (Hodges et al., 2013; Muilenburg & Berge, 2005). Simpson (2004) suggests the social and academic 'fit' between the learner and academic life, feelings of isolation in online learning and individual motivation to succeed, all impact retention in the online environment.

To improve retention and transition, Hughes (2007) suggests an institution should focus resources on students who will most likely be at risk, including proactive identification, early detection of disengagement communication, and targeted support for at-risk learners. Lisciandro and Gibbs (2016), agree that the labour intensive follow up with students in the *OnTrack* program has frequently prompted re-engagement in studies. In recent years, the implementation of the UniPrep Curriculum Enabling Model, has had success in retention and transition rates to undergraduate study in the on-campus mode (Sharp et al., 2014). This model was designed in response to course feedback and reflected program-based research, review of literature, and benchmarking that informed both the curriculum design and implementation. This vision was also underpinned by a philosophy of engagement, support and belonging. A holistic approach to course development based on a 3C model of cohesion, coherence and connectedness (Sharp et al., 2014), aimed to improve the confidence, skills and knowledge of enabling students, with a focus on priorities that address particular enabling student needs, circumstances and aspiration. The six curriculum principles identified in Kift's "transition pedagogy": transition, diversity, design, engagement, assessment, and evaluation and monitoring also influenced the development of this model (2009). The application of this enabling model to the online context was our next priority.

A particular focus on a commitment to ethical care for students and sustained support strategies to improve the online experience for students was applied. The UniPrep Curriculum Enabling Model identifies four quadrants regarded as critical to achieving quality, efficacy and efficiency, within a framework of care and values that includes leadership, community, the individual and teaching and learning.

Figure 1: ECU UniPrep Curriculum Enabling Model (Lane & Sharp, 2014)



Substantial attention has been given to online attrition but little literature exists to explain strategies to improve the persistence of online learners (Nash, 2008). The following discussion describes the specific enabling strategies as applied to online learning, under the UniPrep Curriculum Enabling Model (see Figure 1).

The Leadership Quadrant

Enabling and learner centred practices in the Leadership Quadrant focus on establishing a shared vision, commitment to guiding principles, building a collaborative and inclusive culture

and enacting supportive leadership (Sharp et al., 2014). This included the employment of like-minded, pedagogically aligned staff, who believe enabling students are both aspirational and capable rather than deficit. The UniPrep leadership team models inclusion, respect and care as staff are supported to understand and engage with course values and practices as these impact the effective and consistent classroom practice and skills, critical to student learning and persistence (Tinto, 2006).

Staff unity and practice is essential both at unit and course level. Online this means, units delivered by a unified, supportive academic team who collaborate to provide timely, consistent and appropriate feedback to students on Discussion Board (DB), in email and during Adobe sessions. Baker (2010) found instructor presence to be a significant predictor of student affective learning, cognition, and motivation. UniPrep online units start with a Welcome video by the UniPrep Course Coordinator, to set expectations for students and encourage uptake of all support on offer. An integral part of the online teaching team are the Academic Learning Consultants (ALCs), who run regular live drop in sessions, allowing students to ask questions and receive feedback on all units offered. The supplemental tutoring provided through these sessions is noted as a successful strategy to improve online course completion (Lisciandro & Gibbs, 2016; Nash, 2008).

Transition literature also suggests students often have difficulty navigating university due to a lack of guidance and information prior to enrolment and the plethora of demands unique to transition to university (Nash, 2008; Urquart & Pooley, 2007). To counteract this feeling of being overwhelmed early, academic staff deliver live Adobe StartRight sessions for students who enroll late or need to review information. These student centred sessions, emphasise student online learning responsibilities, where and when to get support, consolidate the starting process and support online student confidence and competence regarding university expectations.

Knowing what to expect from a tertiary institution and understanding the expectations of being an online student are emphasized through clear and consistent messages from academic staff

across all units. Consistently addressing factors such as knowing what to expect, building familiarity with procedures and systems, unit plans and assessment schedules and developing relationship with key staff, fosters the opportunity for success in the transition to university (McMillan, 2013). Clear and consistent online learning environments in all unit BlackBoard (BB) sites support student confidence and competency when using the online learning systems as it eradicates the need for students to learn new interfaces and IT systems in trying to access online content.

The Community Quadrant

The Community Quadrant articulates the commitment to ensure everyone experiences a sense of belonging (Kift, et al., 2010; Tinto, 2006). An important factor for online student retention is the development of an interactive (Baker, 2010), genuine and reliable learning community. Online academic staff support students to see that learning is more than a series of assessments. Curriculum is designed for steady engagement in learning experiences and to support growth of knowledge and competence. Independent learning strategies are explicitly taught, so students develop confidence to employ them. Developing a clear understanding of tertiary systems, processes, schedules and understanding their own learning preferences and skills aims to build student efficacy and locus of control (Krause, Boschner, Duchesne & McMaugh, 2010, p.270) regarding their learning.

The development of community starts prior to the first week of study as emails and texts are sent alerting students to the start of the Orientation weeks of semester. All online students are invited to on-campus Orientation events if they are able to, or would like to attend. This is mentioned in the literature as supporting student preparation for and expectations of learning (Nash, 2008; Radwan & Leeds, 2009; Ryan, 2001). The importance of engagement and membership of the wider UniPrep community, with access to all the on-campus support is emphasised. The ability to merge study modes allows online students to attend all on-campus ALC workshops and drop in sessions allowing for the flexibility of online learning with the

immediacy of on-campus support. All online support workshops and links are advertised on BB, ensuring equity and flexibility of support.

During semester an announcements page and email is used on a weekly basis to keep students up to date with learning requirements and unit expectations. Used in conjunction with the Unit Plan and Semester Study Schedule, students are given both an overview of the units whilst being guided through weekly detail. Regular announcements are used to build a sense of community and continuity and as students become familiar with the names of their academic staff, they perceive a relationship is being developed. Staff make sure that all communication whether on DB, emails, announcements or Adobe sessions is professional but personable, relevant and personalized, in an endeavour to counter the faceless, rather clinical approach which can create a sense of isolation in some online learning situations. With a lack of social interaction being identified as the largest barrier to learning (Mullenburg & Berge, 2005), the development of an effective learning community has been the focus. Communication expectations are demonstrated, modelled and practiced as part of the students' UniPrep experience in all units. The importance of respectful communication is highlighted in the two-way relationship between staff and students so that the realisation it is real people who are communicating is never lost. The development of genuine relationships and care is a key component of the online delivery.

Academic staff in the Learning Skills unit, run consecutive Adobe Live sessions in the first two weeks of semester to help early development of a sense of community from the start of students' learning experience. The first Adobe Live session held on the first day of semester is a general orientation to tertiary study where students are led through Unit documents and BB sites, introduced to staff and have an opportunity to ask questions in real time. The second, held in the second week outlines weekly study requirements, allowing students to understand weekly expectations and access and use the online processes. The establishment of study habits early in the semester aims to assist success, growth of confidence and competence and a renewed optimism in their ability, which in turn supports a sense of belonging. This is especially

important for a cohort who often has either limited study experience or success or both. The Adobe sessions allow opportunity for initial assessment questions to be answered instantaneously thus resulting in a lessening of the transactional distance and an increase in academic staff presence (Baker, 2010), both important for online student engagement and retention. Questions and answers are recorded and posted so students have the opportunity to view the information at any point throughout the semester.

Adobe sessions are designed not to give new information, but to consolidate key learning points and requirements for assessments. Students have one place to check and re-check assessment details, be assured that everyone has been given the same information and have the opportunity to clarify any questions. It is designed to be a support and a live interaction for online students. Students are however, encouraged to be independent learners and work steadily through each of the online tutorials (with supports and scaffolds), rather than be reliant on the Adobe sessions as the first point of contact/information.

One of the most visible methods of communication for UniPrep online learners is the DB in each unit. The DB is visible to all students in the unit for the duration of the semester allowing students to go back to threads and forums for information. The DB is used as a way of incorporating discussion amongst the students rather than a Q & A between staff and students. Staff are an active and constant presence on the DB, with each day of the week monitored. The importance of online instructors, is according to Baker (2010), critical in setting the climate for learning, drawing in participants, prompting discussion and reinforcing student contributions. Staff start threads, comment on students' posts, correct mistaken understandings and answer questions. With up to four staff on a particular unit, the importance of clear communication and moderation between staff is paramount.

The DB is also a place where students introduce themselves and are welcomed to the unit and study by their peers and academic staff. It is here in this first introductory forum that connections between students are made. They discover fellow students bound for the same

undergraduate degree, students with similar reasons for undertaking UniPrep, students with similar life situations as themselves and others who feel as nervous, overwhelmed and excited as they are. This level of social support results in positive adjustment to academic, social and emotional outcomes (Urquhart & Pooley, 2007). Students realise they are not alone on this learning journey and are encouraged by the staff to answer each other's questions on DB, share information and develop effective and professional communication through expectations and modelling. Students are encouraged to form peer relationships through the DB, leading to the creation of student led study groups, some online, whilst others are organised on campus. The first Adobe sessions show students that working together is an invaluable source of support. Fellow students know better than anyone else, the challenges, struggles and triumphs of embarking on tertiary study and as students get to know others bound for the same undergraduate degree the transition to these undergraduate degrees is made with the support of others.

The Individual Quadrant

The Individual Quadrant recognises the significance of participants' personal journeys. The curriculum is adapted to ensure students understand and develop skills and behaviours known to correlate with academic persistence and success such as risk-taking, goal setting, openness to change, identity shifts, engagement with peer support and friendship, resulting in increased self-confidence and self-esteem (Cantwell & Grayson, 2002; Cullity, 2006; Willans & Seary, 2011). Engaging students in relevant learning tasks helps build resilient, independent learners, who may become positive role-models and leaders amongst peers, colleagues and communities (Crawford, 2014).

The development of a semester planner early in the semester, as an assessment task, allows students to view study demands across a whole semester. This encourages students to make changes in their lives to be better able to meet the demands of study. In developing a sense of direction, they have a strategy and plan rather than approaching study in a haphazard fashion. This assessment also allows for the development of IT skills and knowledge. For some online

students, a lack of confidence and/or knowledge about IT systems is a hindrance to engagement (Muilenburg & Berge, 2005; Nash, 2008; Rovai, 2003). An assessment that supports the development of multiple IT skills early in the semester and which is scaffolded and modelled, supports students to overcome this barrier. The development of a semester planner is a key organisational tool, supported by student teaching evaluation data, as one of the most useful assessments of the UniPrep Course, both for self-management and the development of basic computer skills.

All semester planners are posted on the DB with marks allocated for peer review and comment upon each other's planners. Students therefore gain feedback from multiple sources and the opportunity for students to learn from peers' work is given. Often peer feedback includes management and IT elements they found useful in others' planners and which they plan to incorporate in their own. Peer feedback allows for the strengthening of an effective learning community, by encouraging students to take the risk of posting their work onto a public forum and feeling empowered to comment upon the work of others. Unit content and assessment expectations scaffold these understandings. Through this process, students are encouraged and motivated by commentary on their work reinforcing that though online, they are not alone but part of a cohort working towards the same goals. Moreover, it is credited by students as a catalyst for influencing their motivation, active learning and participation and the achievement of learning outcomes. Importantly students gain a clearer realization of how their study will help them meet desired ambitions and goals.

Extensive Student at Educational Risk (SAER) support strategies also aim to bridge the sense of disconnect that can be felt by online students. Each semester all online students are contacted early in the semester via telephone calls from the academic and support staff. Nash (2008) cites the lack of personal contact as a common criticism of online learning and the benefits of proactive contact are described by Simpson (2004). Phone contact gives the staff a chance to check on how the students are progressing in their organisational skills, accessing of IT systems and understanding of course content. Students are identified early if they have not engaged

with the online BB site and the learning materials and contacted both by text and phone to check they understand expectations. Students can also ask questions and check their own understandings but more importantly, realise that the staff are working in their best interests and are desirous of their success. Being able to hear a 'real' voice has proven to be a welcome addition to the SAER strategies with a merging of online and real interaction benefiting students as they start UniPrep.

Students with Learning and Assessment Plans (LAPS) are included in the telephoning strategy as a way of adding to the support offered to them by ECU's Equity and Diversity staff. Telephoning overcomes the oft-held notion by online students that they are 'not allowed' to contact academic staff, except via online means. While the majority of communication is through DB and email, students appreciate knowing that 'the name does have a voice' and they are encouraged to call as they balance the demands of study and life.

The Teaching and Learning Quadrant

The Teaching and Learning Quadrant highlights effective enabling practices emerging from research. Quality, excellence and consistency is achieved through inclusive approaches to all aspects of course planning, development, delivery and review (Kift et al., 2010). UniPrep review processes include consistent approaches to unit design, rigorous review, alignment with core principles, and mapping of content, assessment and learner-centred strategies for consistency and coherence. The team has agreed upon holistic strategies for consistent communication with students including adoption of a shared Unit Plan template, course-wide BB environment and tutor email templates. Of importance is the relevance of the curriculum and as Ryan (2001) states the learning experiences must be designed from the perspective of the student, not from the availability of a particular technology, or from the teacher's focus on 'content' or from what suits the institution's systems.

Research highlights that feeling comfortable, confident and connected in new courses improves engagement and enhances chances of success (Kift et al, 2010; Muilenburg & Berge, 2005;

Tinto, 2006). UniPrep online strategies, implemented to address student confidence in academic learning include the careful sequencing of learning with assessment tasks which build in complexity over the semester. This development of academic and learning skills is supported by extensive scaffolding. Consciously embedded links between units also help support the transference of learning. Library searches, note taking, referencing, summary and reflective writing learnt in the Learning Skills unit directly support essay writing in Academic Writing, reflective writing in Humanities and report writing in Science. Consistent staff communication assists in making these links explicit to students.

The structure of units is also important. Units have been modularised and learning materials sequenced to culminate in authentic assessments. All materials are available from the start of semester allowing students to adapt their learning to fit flexible lifestyles. Unit outlines clearly highlight when assessments are due and supporting Adobe sessions, both live and recorded are provided at point of need. All teaching and learning emphasises the importance of students developing clear study goals and an understanding of the skills, successful students employ is highlighted. The focus is on the processes of learning – pre assessment, during assessment and post assessment and what to do to maximise success at each of these stages. Each tutorial builds on from the previous tutorial allowing for consistency, development and practice of key learning skills and understanding. Success in assessments is linked to working independently through each of the activities, with the aim for students to see learning as a process of knowledge growth and understanding, not a series of assessment submissions. Detailed rubrics are provided to allow students to clearly understand assessment expectations. Assessments are often the tipping point for students which is why as a team, each semester we audit and map assessment across all units to check that students are not facing unreasonable loads.

Methodology

We are in the early days of a focus on the online curriculum delivery. Measurement of the efficacy of our strategies in developing a sense of belonging, competence and confidence requires some understanding of the student experience itself. Mixed methods offer a data set

that gives some insights into the student perceptions of factors that both assist and challenge their online experience. An online student survey (N= 49) informed both by the literature and with a focus on the efficacy of our strategies was developed. Approval was obtained to extend existing research ethics for the on-campus cohort to allow us to survey the online students. Quantitative and qualitative data was generated from the surveys. Insider accounts were obtained through a thematic analysis of (N=77) online student discussion board posts and was used to identify, analyse and report patterns (themes) regarding students' own perceptions of what supported and challenged their online learning (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Discussion of results

The thematic analysis identified four key themes: organisation, social interaction, personal qualities and communication which students perceived to support or challenge their learning in the online environment. The survey questions focused on the student experience of specific curriculum (content, organisation and accessibility), communication (Adobe, phone, email and DB), assessments (clarity, feedback, and rubrics) and building learning communities (DB, social media, and chat rooms in Adobe sessions).

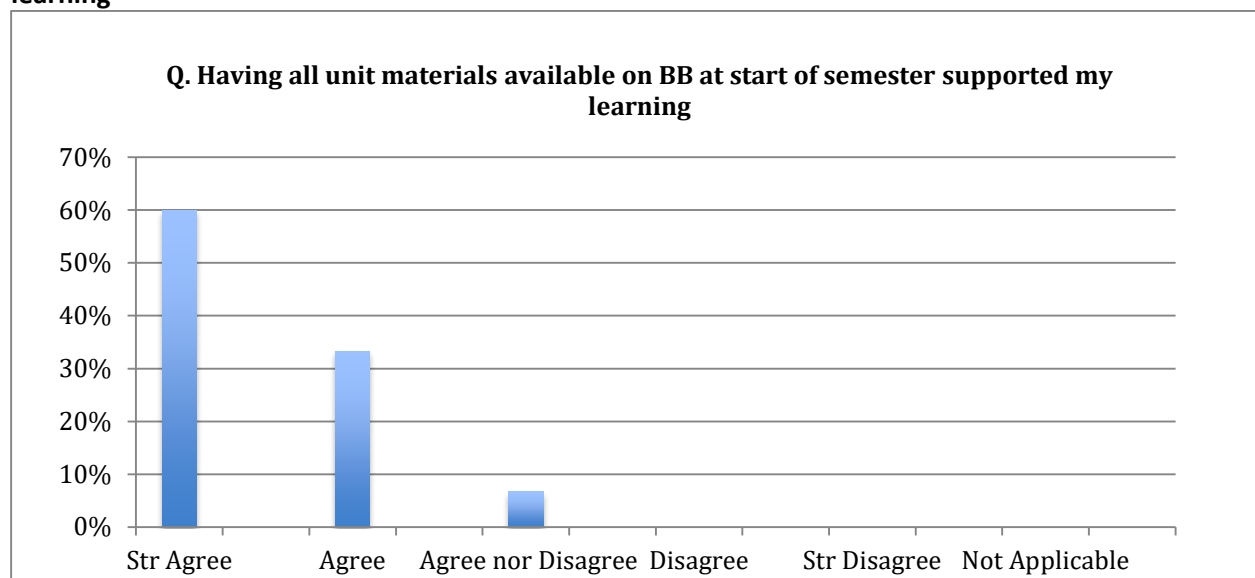
Organisation

Organisation was identified as both a support and challenge to online learning. 89% of responses in the thematic analysis suggested that completing a semester planner, making lists and plans, identifying time frames and deadlines and having routine and structure supported their online learning. Conversely, 47% of students identified lack of organisation, distractions, having the wrong priorities, balancing work, life and study and time management as challenges. The strategy of emphasising organisation of learning early in the semester is indicated to support student learning, confidence and self-management. Typical student comments from the survey include: *"...Although there are some days I find myself procrastinating, my time management and self-discipline has improved greatly."* There is no doubt that the weekly and semester planners are important in developing habits that support learning. *"This has motivated me to change my lifestyle and mentally I have been stimulated to learn more. I now*

realise there is more time in my day to study thanks to re-thinking my time management.” The organisational skills developed were also indicated, “For future study, the organisation aspect of this unit will be used; it has shown me how to be effectively organised. I will use the note taking strategies, before this unit my notes were messy and unorganised (sic).”

The impact of a well-organised, well-resourced curriculum, presented and sequenced in a way that supported learning was evident in the comments such as *“I would have to say the order of the teaching in this unit and the amount of time I had to learn materials ... contributed to my success”* and *“Readily available resources and assessment examples helped when confusion set in”* and *“Extremely useful resources, learning materials and links”* support the impact of a well-structured curriculum. There is strong agreement (93%) in the survey responses in Figure 2, that having the semester unit materials available on BB from the start of semester supported student learning (60% strongly agree and 33% agree).

Figure 2: Survey responses: % agreement that unit materials on BB at start of semester supported learning



Community

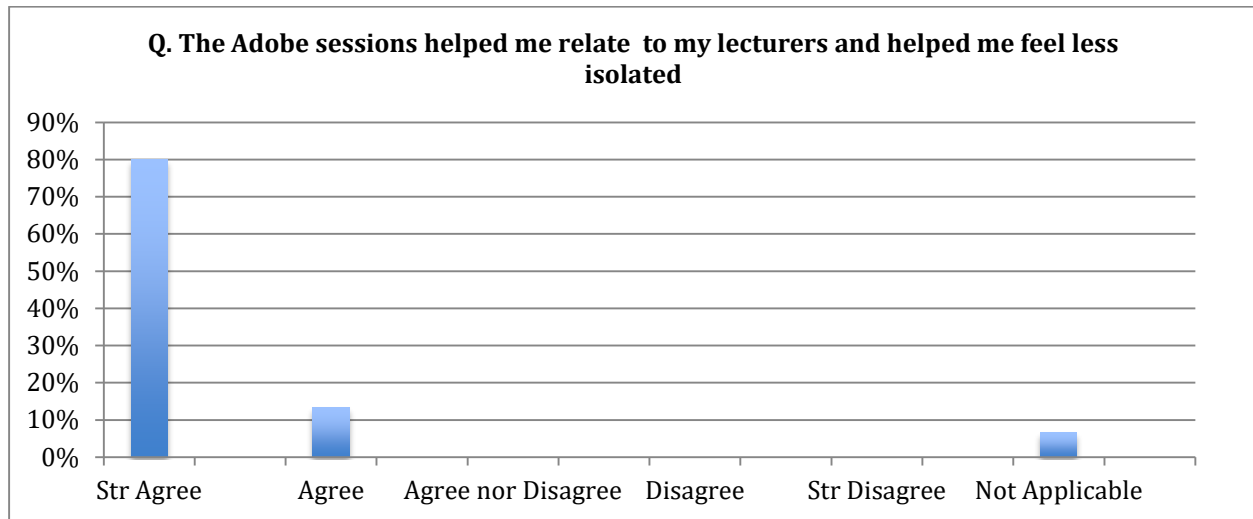
The development of community and social interaction, key foci for online strategies, were identified as important in supporting online student learning. 53% of posts in the thematic

analysis indicated talking with peers, using the DB, Adobe sessions, sharing feelings, support from family and friends and being able to ask the tutor questions in real time were major supports to learning. However 14% recognized that online learning was also a challenge, as they missed working with others, felt isolated and recognised that they needed to make an effort to be more social and interact with peers.

Students indicated appreciation of personal contact with both academic staff and peers. The survey data indicated that communication through Adobe sessions is starting to have a positive effect: *"The Adobe online sessions, first and foremost"* was quoted as the best thing about online learning. Early Adobe sessions seem to alleviate the sense of being overwhelmed and isolated. *"It's nice to know we aren't alone in feeling overwhelmed, and we can help each other."* And a response to a first Adobe session clearly shows how important they are in counteracting the sense of disconnect, *"wow....feeling better already thought it was just me"*.

Interestingly, regardless of their actual 'live' involvement, students still found the Adobe sessions valuable in building a sense of community and checking understanding, as indicated by these responses: *"The Adobe sessions were a great way to conduct lectures for 'onliners.'I did not write in the chat box, but could see how helpful it could be"*. Recognition that the Adobe and drop in sessions contributed to class culture, student confidence and belonging is reflected by the comments related to the online support; *"The Adobe and Drop In sessions are helpful to stop stressing, it has taken lots of courage to participate but it helps that classroom feel"*; *"The help and support offered in the Discussion Boards"*. These comments encourage us that we are on the right path to counteracting the disconnect of online learning. Figure 3 demonstrates the overwhelming agreement (93%) with (80% strongly agree) that Adobe sessions aided the building of relationships with the lecturers and reduced the sense of isolation.

Figure 3: Survey responses: % agreement Adobe sessions helped me relate to my lecturers and feel less isolated



Communication

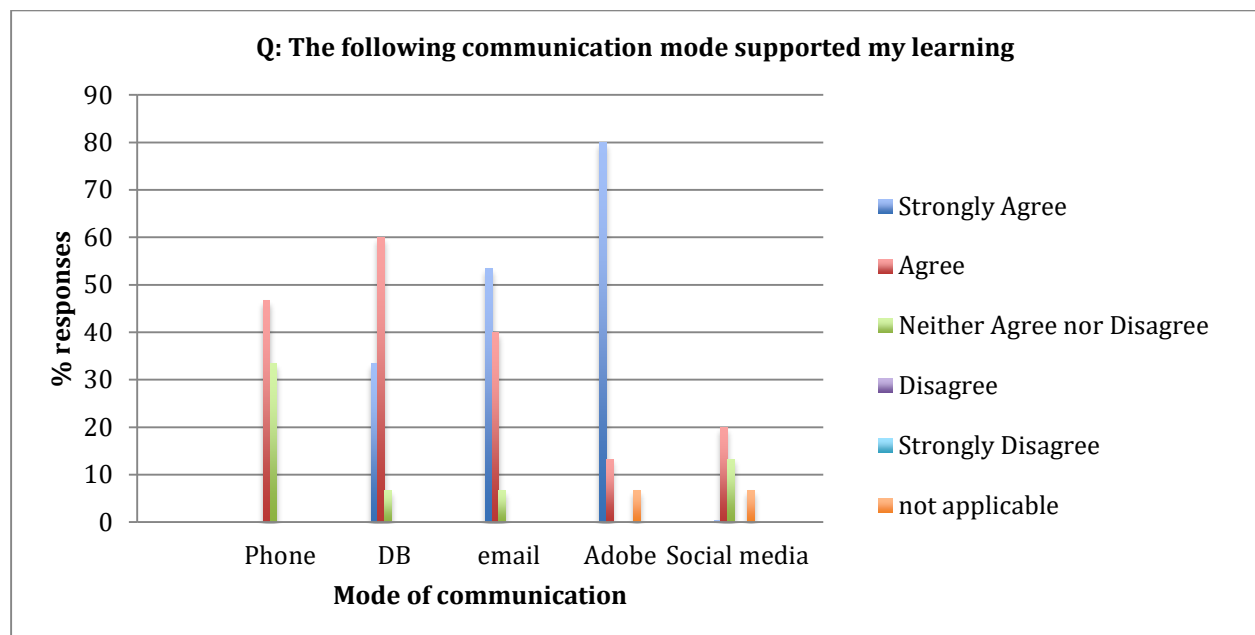
Communication was described as both a positive and negative. In the thematic analysis, 26% of responses mentioned clear instructions, lecture notes, activities, Adobe recordings, email contact and DB supported understanding. 14% however indicated that no face to face, no one to bounce ideas off and lack of immediate response and feedback was a challenge. 9% indicated that the IT and technical issues were a challenge. The Adobes' 93% agreement with 80% strongly agree, are recognised by students as a strong communicative tool supporting both community building and learning, (see Figure 4) with comments such as *"the orientation tonight it's been very informative and I appreciate all of the extra information"*. Students also appreciated the real time communication *"The Adobe sessions were very helpful. Being able to ask questions and have them answered in real time was great"* and the ability to pause recordings indicated students appreciated the flexibility of accessing information in their own time. *"The Adobe Connect Sessions made a huge difference with understanding assessment requirements, especially being able to watch them at a later date"*.

Discussion Boards similarly were important to building student confidence. *"The discussion board provides unlimited support...this process has given me the confidence that I needed to*

commence my online Business Degree.” Students appreciated communication from both staff and peers as the following survey response indicated, “helpful and instructive lecturers, supportive fellow student contributions to discussions on the Discussion Board and on Facebook, access to unit information available on Blackboard at all times.”

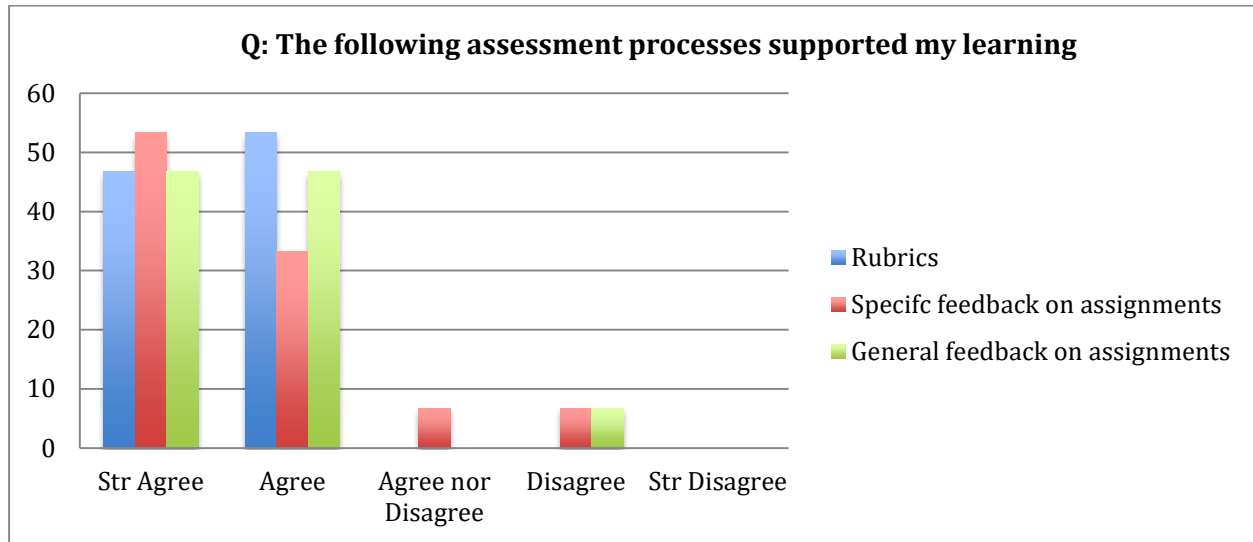
Figure 4 shows that while there was 93% agreement that email contact with staff supported learning, this was less strongly agreed with than other modes (53% strongly agree). It does seem that students perceived that staff were easily contactable and responded in a timely, personal, useful way “.....have been amazing lecturers and were so helpful and prompt with replying to questions” thus supporting positive student experience. Social media, although one of the strategies that was encouraged for students to use as a way to connect, was not rated as highly in supporting learning (23% agreement) as the Adobe sessions (93% agreement; 80% strongly agree), email (93% agreement; 53% strongly agree) Discussion Board (93% agreement; 33% strongly agree) and phone contact (46% agree). Perhaps students see social media as less of an academic support and more of a social support and this warrants further investigation.

Figure 4: Survey responses: % agreement mode of communication in supporting online learning.



Feedback on assessments is also critical to student learning online. Student perceptions of the feedback communication processes that supported learning are indicated in Figure 5.

Figure 5: Survey responses: % Responses in relation to the efficacy of the online assessment processes



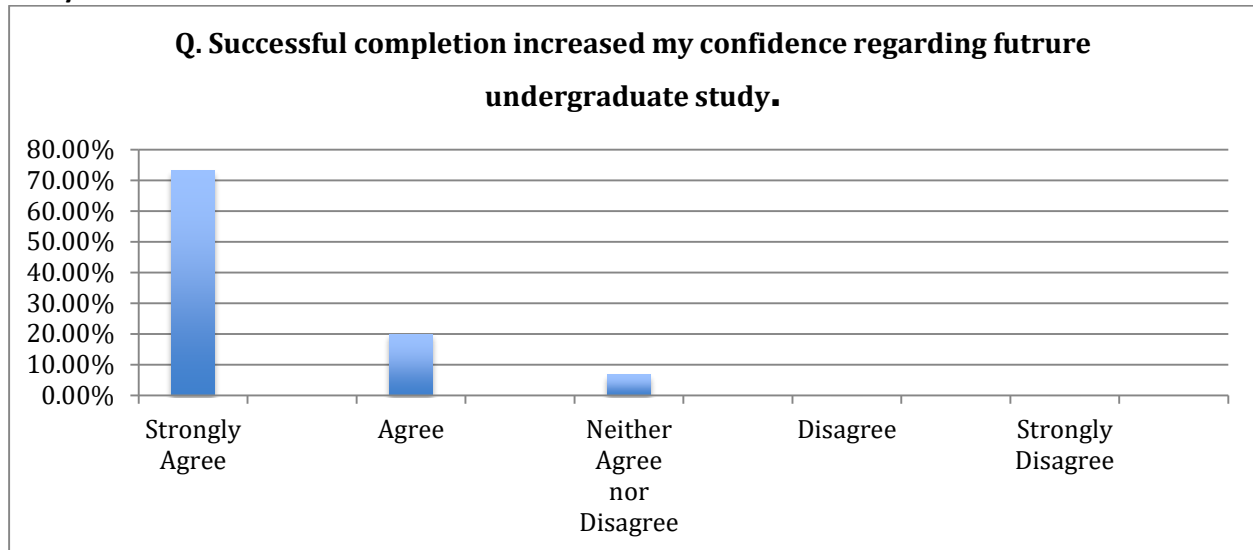
Personal Qualities

The impact of personal qualities was indicated with students having clear understanding of how this affected their success in online learning. The cohort had a good understanding of taking personal control (locus of control) over their study. In terms of challenges, 47% of the thematic posts showed students recognised that personal motivation, procrastination, lack of academic confidence, learning to be adaptable, needing to listen and ask questions and employ self-discipline as challenges to learning online. Interestingly several respondents indicated that a drive for perfection led to a feeling of giving up.

Interestingly, 40% in this category, recognised the journey to becoming independent learners was occurring through problem solving, having time to process information and reflect, to work at their own pace, to be held accountable and maintaining both self-motivation and flexibility. 10% of posts recognised the lack of personal skills such as independent learning, organisation, understanding what was required and academic skills such as, referencing, reflective thinking, and research skills hampered their learning. There is strong evidence from the survey results

(see Figure 6), that students do perceive a greater confidence to succeed in future undergraduate study as a result of succeeding in their enabling course.

Figure 6: Survey responses: % completion increased my confidence regarding future undergraduate study.



Conclusion

The key focus of this paper has been to report strategies implemented in the online UniPrep course as an attempt to improve the learning experience and persistence of the online cohort. ECU's UniPrep Curriculum Enabling Model has been extended to develop a sense of belonging, competence and confidence for online learners. An intentionally designed curriculum based on leadership, community, the individual and teaching and learning including deliberate strategies designed and implemented to extend the culture of care and community provided in the on-campus mode to the online learners has been the start of positive changes to the learning experience for the online cohort. This, along with a targeted approach to students at educational risk, are together, having some positive impact on students' perception of their experience and will hopefully translate into both retention and quality preparation for university. Importantly, we are endeavouring to bridge the disconnect often felt by online students by employing quality teaching staff, who not only deliver the curriculum, but place importance and emphasis on collaborative values, clear communication, the building and

maintaining of student relationships and who show further support for students through clear, respectful, quality feedback.

Evidence from a student perspective demonstrates that in particular, organisation, social interaction, the impact of personal qualities and communication are important factors in both their successes and challenges around online learning. A challenge raised in this project is to continue to support students to recognise and understand the impact of factors such as personal motivation, procrastination, confidence, adaptability, and self-discipline in improving persistence in online learning. University retention and transition data shows that while we are beginning to bridge the gap for these students by counteracting the disconnect they often feel in an online environment, there is still more work to do. Feelings of isolation will continue and the effort required by students and staff to build an interactive learning environment is an ongoing challenge.

We will continue to modify unit content and delivery to further meet student study needs. However we are mindful that as the literature indicates, the key to success in enabling education both online and on-campus is multi-faceted, difficult to quantify and not necessarily measured easily by retention and progression data. Our continual modifications will be based on student feedback and commentary so that we know we are best attempting to meet the needs of our online students.

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