
From Recruitment to Graduation: A Whole-of-Institution Approach to Supporting Online Students

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Abstract

Many universities and colleges are moving from traditional on-campus teaching to also teaching online courses to distant students. Institutions face many challenges in supporting their distant students and need a holistic view of the support that distant students require. This paper proposes ways that institutions could meet these needs of online (distance) students through exploring the stages that an online student progresses through from the student's perspective. The stages that an online student progresses through are:

- Recruitment
- Enrolment
- Induction
- Participation
- Graduation & Beyond

The 'Melbourne Model' for supporting online students that is proposed recommends that institutions should put support procedures in place for each of these stages so that prospective and current online students have high quality experiences that are characterised by easy access to information, high quality learning experiences, and prompt, accurate and friendly responses to all enquiries. Academic staff are actively involved during the *Participation* stage (while students are enrolled in courses) and play the central role in the success of this stage. This stage is clearly important in influencing students' perceptions of their experience with the institution, but it is by no means the only critical stage in a student's journey from recruitment to graduation.

Administrative staff are essential for the institution's success in online teaching as they are key players during *all* stages of students' online experiences. Seeing students' experiences as a whole is essential for the student to move seamlessly through their journey of online education and for the institution to provide the support needed at each stage.

Introduction

The theme of institutional support for distant students has been explored by other authors (for example Schroeder, 2001, Halpin, Scheer & Lockee, 2003) with the focus generally being on support for students who are enrolled in a unit of study. A broader approach is taken by Wilkinson, Turrentine & Scheer (2001) as they describe the holistic approach to distance learning taken at Virginia Polytechnic Institute & State University, and taking a holistic approach to encompass all stages that online students progress through in their interactions with an institution is to be encouraged. This paper proposes an institutional approach to supporting all stages of the journey that online students take, from when they are considering studying online and are looking at the courses available to them until they have completed their degree and graduate. While some institutions have offered courses to distant students for many years and have developed very

sophisticated support structures for their distant students, the current decade has seen many institutions only recently offering courses to distant students, generally through online courses. These institutions may struggle to support students with needs they have not previously had to address in their on-campus students. It is acknowledged that in addition to the support processes for distant online students, which are the focus of the current paper, the institution must also provide appropriate infrastructure to support the needs of online students (Mishra, 2001; Schroeder, 2001).

A potentially significant challenge to providing excellent support to distant online students may be the institution's existing organisational structures and communication between sections of the institution (Levy, 2003). For many educational institutions there are different cultures in different parts of the organisation and some organisational or cultural change may be required for the successful implementation of the holistic approach to student support proposed here. The goals of providing excellent support and caring about individual students and their outcomes should underpin all support processes and be shared by all sections of the organisation that support students.

Many sources have informed the proposed 'Melbourne Model' for supporting online students (alternatively, the 'No More Gaps' model!): the literature in the area; interviews with academic staff who teach online courses; interviews with administrative staff who respond to student queries and who are involved in the recruitment and enrolment processes; interviews with course advisors; surveys of online students about what was successful and what failed them; and interviews with staff who support online students in the non-academic aspects of online studies. Administrative and support staff have extensive communications with online students and, because of this, they are a powerful resource for any institution wishing to improve their processes in supporting distant students.

The paper first looks at online learning and defines how the term 'online teaching and learning' is used in the paper. The paper then looks at the rapid increase in courses taught online and alerts the reader of the need to examine institutional policies if there is a move from only on-campus teaching to also teaching distant students studying online. It then explores the five stages that a student progresses through from *Recruitment* to *Graduation & Beyond*, with suggestions for institutions on how they could support students through each stage of this journey.

It is acknowledged that institutions that are well-experienced in distance education may have many, perhaps all, aspects of the proposed support model in place. However, for the large and increasing number of institutions that have only recently started teaching online and supporting students remote from the campus there remains a need to articulate and explore the stages that online students progress through and to examine how students can best be supported at each stage. It is in this context that the model of support for online students is proposed.

Defining 'Online Teaching & Learning'

The term *Online Learning* is used in a variety of ways in the literature. In this paper the terms *online education*, *online learning*, and *online courses* are used to refer to courses that have a website and electronic communications between teacher and students and are offered to students who are not required to attend classes on-campus. That is, corresponding to Harasim's (2000) term *Totally Online Mode* ('Totally online mode relies on networking as the primary teaching medium for an entire course or program') and to Level 9 ('Entire course on the Web for students located anywhere') of Bonk, Cummings, Hara, Fischler & Lee's (2000) ten level 'continuum of web integration in college courses'.

The Move to Online Teaching & Learning

The numbers of students studying at a distance, generally online, is increasing (Howell, Williams & Lindsay, 2003; Allen & Seaman, 2004) . There are many reasons for this, including technology availability and the increasing need for lifelong learning. The technologies that make it possible for remote students to connect to a university across the planet in a trivial way are relatively recent advents. This has led to an increasing number of institutions offering online courses and there are now strong social and professional pressures for a much larger proportion of citizens to update their qualifications (Howell *et al.* , 2003). Studying online allows those in employment to study while still working and allows students in locations remote from universities to undertake studies.

Major studies into online learning in the USA were undertaken in 2003 and 2004 by the Sloan Consortium (Allen & Seaman 2003 & 2004). For these studies 'online' was defined as at least 80% of course content delivered online and typically having no face-to-face meetings. In 2003 994 institutions responded to 3,033 surveys distributed and in 2004 over 1,100 colleges and universities responded to the survey. These studies found that over 1.9 million students were studying online in Fall 2003, up from over 1.6 million students taking at least one online course during Fall 2002. Online enrolment growth was expected to accelerate, with the expected average growth rate for online students for 2004 being 24.8%, up from 19.8% in 2003 and institutions surveyed expected the number of online students to grow to over 2.6 million by Fall 2004. The study found no evidence that online enrolments have reached a plateau (Allen & Seamen 2004).

The 2003 study also looked at which institutions were offering courses online and found that the USA 81% of all institutions of higher education offered at least one fully online or blended course and that complete online degree programs were offered by 34% of the institutions surveyed (Allen & Seaman, 200 3). These studies demonstrate the rapid increase of online teaching and learning and the high proportion of institutions offering some online education opportunities. Many of these institutions will be facing new challenges in supporting online students who are distant from the campus.

Institutional Policies and Online Students

Institutions need to address issues of policy and practises and investigate whether students who are remote from the campus are disadvantaged in any way. Areas for investigation may include provision of services, such as student counselling (*is telephone counselling available?*) and language skills units and learning skills units (*how do they support remote students?*) and extracurricular opportunities (*can distant students join clubs?*) or similar. Schroeder (2001) suggests that a range of extracurricular activities available online can add to a student's experience with the institution and thus should not be ignored. The *Commonwealth of Learning* (Bottomley & Calvert, 2003) has an excellent guide on this topic for institutions that have traditionally taught on-campus and have recently moved into online teaching.

There are many institutions that must consider their institution's policies in a range of areas to ensure that off campus students and, increasingly, off campus staff are not disadvantaged and are well supported.

Stages of an Online Student's Experience

When exploring online learning and how an institution could respond and support online students we should consider the whole process from the student's perspective—from when he or she is

considering online studies until they graduate—so that all needs are met. Such an analysis leads to the identification of five stages in the journey of online students (Figure 1 & Table 1).

Figure 1. Stages an online student progresses through that are addressed by the ‘Melbourne Model’ of supporting online students.

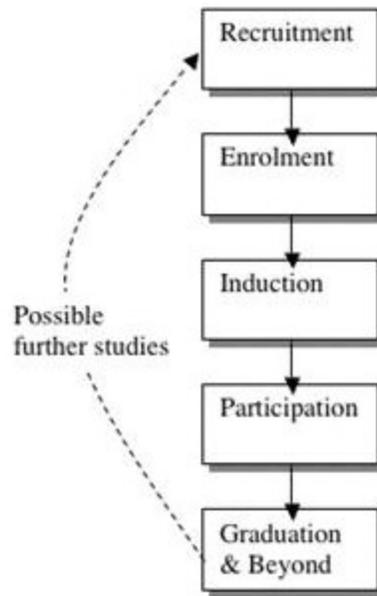


Table 1. Description of stages on an online student's journey from recruitment to graduation.

Stage	Description
Recruitment	Prospective student considers studies and seeks information about options for studying online. Prospective student applies to study online with the institution .
Enrolment	Student has successfully applied to study with the institution and enrolls.
Induction	Student has enrolled and should be welcomed so that they begin to establish their sense of belonging with the institution's community. Further information should be provided and a course advisor allocated and introduced to each student.
Participation	Student engages in online learning in a series of courses. Academic and non-academic issues will arise that need addressing. Student will require advice about course selection or other non-academic matters.
Graduation & Beyond	Student completes course of study, graduates and moves on. Further studies may be considered at a later date.

The institution and its staff must address each of these stages and work towards outcomes that will enhance the reputation of the institution through student satisfaction at each stage (Table 2). A whole-of-institution approach is needed to meet students' needs, as each stage is important for the student's experience to be a satisfying one.

Table 2. Outcomes from each stage that are desirable from the perspective of the student and the institution.

Stage	Desired outcomes
Recruitment	Prospective student finds it easy to access accurate information about online offerings. Application forms and all required information are available online. Enquiries are responded to promptly, accurately, and in a friendly manner as this sets the student's first impressions of the institution.
Enrolment	All steps of the enrolment procedure to be done online must be clearly described and simple.
Induction	Student feels welcomed by the institution. Relevant information is sent to students in a timely manner. The student should be introduced to their course advisor and given contact details.
Participation	Student has satisfying and successful learning experiences. Student feels a part of institution and its community. Any academic and non-academic matters are solved in a friendly and timely manner. The student feels well supported.
Graduation & Beyond	Graduates should be introduced to the alumni network and feel a part of the institution's alumni community. Students value their relationship with the institution. The institution should be the first place they consider when graduates contemplate further studies.

Many institutions focus on student support within specific courses of study and overlook the important roles that non-academic staff play in the lives of online students. Non-academic staff have important and on-going communications with online students and interact with them at all stages of the process (Table 3). Academic staff members who teach online courses are fundamental to successes in online teaching and learning and if students' academic needs are not met by academic staff then all other support efforts are wasted. However, it is only in one of the stages that academic staff interact with the students and all of the stages must be attended to and must meet the needs of students if the students are to be truly satisfied with their online learning experience. The next section of this paper will look at each of the stages described and examine how institutions could support their students. Academic support within courses is thus not the focus of this paper.

Table 3. Stages of an online student's interactions with the institution and with whom they interact at each stage.

Role	Recruitment	Enrolment	Induction	Participation	Graduation & Beyond
Administrative staff					

• Local (Dept or faculty)	X	X	X	X	
• Institutional	X	X	X	X	X
• Alumni Office					X
Course advisors	X	X	X	X	
Non-academic support staff				X	
Library staff				X	
Online support provider				X	
Academic staff				X	

The ‘Melbourne Model’ for Supporting Online Students

Recruitment

Students who are considering studying online must be able to access information about online offerings in an easy way. An ‘Online Study’ or similar link from the top level of an institution's website should link to a section of the website that addresses all the information a prospective online student needs to know about studying online with the institution. It should clearly define what the institution means by ‘online course’ as there are many definitions used. Rich and detailed information resources for prospective online students, such as technical requirements, characteristics of successful online students and courses available online should be provided, and links to articles about studying online would also be helpful. Links to a model online course or to public sections of selected online courses may also be useful to show prospective online students some of the ‘flavour’ of online courses with that institution. The well-designed website should include both ‘big picture’ and detailed answers about what can be studied online, who is eligible to enrol, expectations of online students, any technical requirements, and so forth. This website would also act as a support for staff of the institution as a source of up-to-date information about online teaching and learning. A simple and explicit path for prospective online students to access accurate and detailed information about studying online is needed.

The telephone number and email address of a specialist staff member who prospective students can contact to discuss their individual case should also be provided as some prospective students are likely to want to ask specific questions and make a connection with a person at the institution. This staff member will understand the sorts of questions likely to arise and the issues concerning prospective online students. Prompt, friendly, and accurate responses to enquiries are vital if prospective students are to become enrolled students.

Application forms, a description of the stages of the application process, and all the information an applicant needs to know should be readily accessible online. An email acknowledging receipt of an application and giving a timeline for each stage of the process should be forwarded to

applicants. Informing applicants of their progress through 'the system' is worthwhile as otherwise they may feel lost in the process.

Enrolment

The enrolment procedure must be clearly described and streamlined for online students. In addition to a clear flowchart of the stages of enrolment and provision of all documentation and forms required for enrolment, students should, again, be provided with a telephone number and email address of a staff member available to help them if there are any problems during the enrolment process. Where possible all stages of the enrolment should be enabled online. An email acknowledging receipt of the enrolment application and at each stage of the process should be sent to students so that they know how their enrolment is progressing. Again, informing students as they progress through 'the system' is very valuable in reassuring them.

Induction

Once a student has enrolled in a course they should be welcomed into the institution and made aware of any further information not already provided during the *Recruitment* and *Enrolment* stages. It is suggested that they should be provided with pertinent information once again as at this time they are likely to be more receptive to the information than they may have been during the earlier stages. Information common to all online students of the institution, such as applying for special consideration, leave of absence, extensions for assignments, how to access online journals, how to buy books online, and so forth should be provided. It is suggested that a single website for all online students be developed and that it should contain current procedures and forms for these and similar needs. New online students would be made aware of the procedures and the website would be available for students to refer to throughout their studies. It is suggested that a link to this generic, institution-wide information page for online students be made from the website of each online course.

In addition to an information pack for new students it is suggested that a 'Welcome Pack' be sent to new online students. In this pack there should be a welcome gift, such as a mug and fridge magnet, with the institution's logo. This welcome gift, with its logo, would help the student begin to identify with the institution and begin to develop the sense of community that is vital for successful online learning.

It is recommended that each online student be allocated a specific course advisor who would be an on-going point of contact for that student during studies with the institution. This too will help the student feel part of the institution as they can develop a relationship with their course advisor who will also come to know the circumstances of individual students. Information, such as a photograph and a brief biography, about the course advisor could also help to facilitate the relationship. This ongoing relationship is important as academic staff are likely to change as students progress through courses, while the course advisor would be an ongoing point of contact over the period of enrolment, particularly between semesters and courses.

Participation

This stage of the process is the second longest (only shorter than *Graduation & Beyond*, which may last for decades) that the student engages with and is the key to the students' learning experiences—indeed this is where learning takes place. If the student is not satisfied with the quality of the learning experiences the rest of the institutional support will not compensate. However, unless the preceding stages have met students' needs, only a small subset of students

will get to this stage. In addition to students' interactions within a course and their academic needs, which are not discussed in this paper, there are other needs that must be supported. These include any non-academic support, such as course advice, technical issues, advice on other issues such as special consideration and similar, and other student services such as student counselling and language or learning support services. Non-academic aspects of this stage should be standardised across the institution.

Appropriate and timely support is crucial for the satisfaction of online students who encounter non-academic difficulties. In our faculty the role of *Online Support Coordinator* was created. This role is a single point of contact that works using a case management approach with online students. That is, whatever the cause of the difficulty, the person in this role acknowledges receipt of the email raising the problem, communicates with the student to clarify the problem, works with the appropriate section of the institution to solve the problem, and then communicates the response to the student. That is, the same person communicates with the student throughout the process, from clarifying the problem to communicating the resolution of the problem. Emails informing the student of progress are sent regularly if problems take more than 24 hours to resolve, so that the student knows that someone is working on their behalf to resolve the problem. This approach avoids the student being 'handballed' from section to section of the institution. The non-academic difficulties that students encounter are sometimes technical (for example, inability to connect to IT systems), sometimes administrative (for example, some systems do not allow access until all enrolment forms are completed), and so forth. This position is an extremely valuable service to students, as students have any problems resolved in a friendly and timely manner, and also to academic staff as it frees them to concentrate on the academic aspects of supporting online learning.

The creation of this role was based on the findings from surveys of online students undertaken in 2000 and 2002 and it has proven to be most successful. This role is vital as it turns students who have experienced, for example, technical difficulties (which can be a large part of the frustration of dissatisfied online students) and who, if not ably assisted, will become severe critics of the institution through their frustration and feelings of isolation. Through this model of support these students feel well supported and valued. Below are some quotes from 'thank you' emails from students who were helped by the *Online Support Coordinator* :

'Thanks for being so prompt. I have successfully changed my password on both accounts. Thanks again. Boy do you have an important job!!!'

'As a mature age student who is still struggling with the complexities of the computer, yet alone all the internal workings, I really felt lost and am forever grateful that I finally got some help.'

'Just a quick note to say thank you very much for solving my "access" problem!! I really can't tell you how relieved I am that I can again access the student page and lecture notes etc . I was becoming increasingly frustrated that no-one could seem to solve my problem or even understand it.'

Converting these potentially dissatisfied students into fans is a substantial achievement and is accomplished through flexibility (such as being available to overseas students at times that suits their time zone), ingenuity in solving problems through working with staff in many sections of the institution, and genuine caring about each student's outcome. Supporting students' non-academic needs through this approach leads to high levels of student satisfaction.

Graduation & Beyond

The institution should ensure that students feel closure and a celebration when they complete their online studies. Many online students are part-time students who are juggling their study with many other work and family commitments. For many online students one can add the potential sense of isolation and lack of a local peer group that understand the achievements of successfully completing tertiary studies. The institution should, thus, offer a sincere form of congratulations and perhaps a small graduation gift, again with the institution's logo, for their achievements. An acknowledgement of the hurdles that the student has overcome and the effort required to achieve success is likely to be valued by the students.

After graduation the positive relationship that has been developed with online students should be maintained with graduates, as they are very powerful advertisements for the institution. Support for graduates may include making connections for new graduates with existing alumni groups in their country or region, a regular newsletter, and organizing regional events for them.

Conclusions

This paper proposes that a whole-of-institution approach is required if distant online students are to be well supported and the reputation of an institution as a provider of quality online education is to be enhanced, and offers for consideration the 'Melbourne Model' of supporting online students. At a time when there are increasing numbers of institutions moving into online education and are addressing the needs of distant students for the first time, there is a need to consider the stages that online students move through and to support students at each stage. This analysis suggests that institutions should address this in a holistic manner—excellence in online teaching within courses is required, but it is not enough if students cannot find information about those courses or if they strike many difficulties and cannot enrol. It is evident that non-academic staff are crucial for an institution to succeed in online teaching and learning ventures and that this is an area that needs to be considered and planned for.

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Online Journal of Distance Learning Administration, Volume VII, Number IV, Winter 2004
State University of West Georgia, Distance Education Center
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