



'I never felt like I was alone': a holistic approach to supporting students in an online, pre-university programme

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ABSTRACT

Programmes that provide adult learners with an alternative pathway to university typically offer considerable support. Students in such enabling, or access, programmes are increasingly choosing to study online because of the flexibility it affords, yet little is known about how well this mode of learning caters for their needs. The aim of this study, therefore, is to establish how well supported enabling students in an online programme feel, and what particular aspects of support work best for these students. The concept of 'holistic' learning, defined in humanistic terms, provides a framework for this discussion. Drawing on data from subject evaluations and an online survey, this qualitative case study compares the experiences of online and on-campus students in an introductory, study skills subject. Significantly, both cohorts reported similar levels of satisfaction with the support received. Regular communications and encouragement from their lecturers were very important to online students, while contact with fellow students was generally not a priority. Online resources, such as lecture recordings and short 'talking head' videos, helped students learn but also personalised their experience. Findings suggest that a supportive online environment can be achieved, thus going some way to addressing students' personal as well as academic needs, and challenging negative stereotypes around the anonymity of online learning.

KEYWORDS

Online learning; distance learning; holistic learning; enabling education; student support; access education

Introduction

When an enabling, pre-university programme in regional Australia introduced an online offering in addition to its well-established on-campus experience, there were fears that the course's holistic approach to student support would be compromised. More than 10 years on, it seems timely to reflect on what we have learnt about online learning in the context of enabling (access) education. This paper describes a qualitative case study that explores the experiences of enabling students in an online programme designed to help them transition to university. The research aims to determine how well supported these students felt in comparison to their on-campus peers, and the aspects of support that best met their needs in an introductory, study skills subject. The concept of 'holistic' learning is unpacked in terms of its theoretical underpinnings and its potential application to online learning environments. Data from unit evaluations and an online survey

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are analysed, comparing the responses of online and on-campus students. The paper explores some of the preconceptions about online learning, and sheds light on its capacity to meet the personal (emotional/social), as well as academic, needs of students.

Literature review

Enabling programmes offer a pathway to university for students from diverse backgrounds, many of whom are the first in their family to attend university. In an Australian context, enabling programmes are viewed as an important pathway for students from disadvantaged backgrounds to gain access to university. These include: students of low socio-economic status (LSES); students from remote and regional areas; Indigenous students; students with a disability; students from non-English speaking backgrounds; and women in non-traditional areas of study (Pitman et al., 2016). There is an assumption that due attention is given to the social and emotional needs of enabling students, as well to their academic preparation for higher education (Pitman et al., 2016). Certainly, the programme featured in this study, operating from a regional Australian university since 1986, has always prided itself on its holistic philosophy, aiming to cater for 'the inner as well as the outer lives of adult learners' (Doyle, 2006, p. 63). Therefore, there was much consternation when this programme branched into online learning in 2007 because lecturers in the programme felt that enabling students, many of whom were considered vulnerable as learners, would never survive without the ongoing pastoral care that had underpinned the internal offering (Danaher, McDougall, Sturgess, & Todorovic, 2008).

This transition to online mode reflects a growing trend for Australian universities, since online and distance learning have been an instrumental part of the movement to widen access and participation (Stone, 2017). Data from the Australian Government Department of Education and Training (2017) indicate that the proportion of distance education has risen steadily since 2011 in Australia, with 22.8% of commencing students in Higher Education enrolling in distance mode in 2016. 'Online' study, for our purposes here, describes an 'off-campus' experience that relies heavily on online technologies. Students in the programme under review complete much of their learning via the online learning management system called Moodle. Though the focus of this paper is the experience of online learners, their responses are compared with the responses of those studying in 'internal' mode which refers to the conventional, on-campus experience.

The flexibility of online learning is its biggest drawcard. Studying from home, accessing most or all study materials online, is a viable alternative for many students, in part because of the financial strains of having to relocate to study, or incur considerable travel expenses (Stone, O'Shea, May, Delahunty, & Partington, 2016). This versatility is also likely to appeal to mature-age students who are juggling family and work commitments (Brown, Keppell, Hughes, Hard, & Smith, 2013). According to the Open Foundation Programme at the University of Newcastle (2014), offering enabling programmes online gives opportunities to many disadvantaged students (cited in Stone et al., 2016, p. 149). Similarly, Devlin and McKay (2016, p. 103) conclude that 'teaching with technology provides LSES students with the flexibility and options they require in order to access and participate successfully in tertiary study'. Although the drive to expand online offerings is partly explained by economic imperatives (Danaher

et al., 2008), the social justice aspects of allowing students from diverse backgrounds to participate in higher education cannot be ignored in debates around the benefits of online learning.

While the flexibility of online and distance offerings is a key factor in their appeal, some negative preconceptions persist, and online learning is frequently viewed as an inferior alternative to the on-campus experience (Todhunter, 2013). Simpson (2013) termed this perceived disparity the 'distance education deficit' (p. 105). Of particular concern is the problem of students feeling isolated and unsupported (Duranton & Mason, 2012; Simpson, 2013; Stone et al., 2016; Todhunter, 2013). A study by Brown et al. (2012) highlighted the experiences of distance students in their first year of study and their struggles to feel a genuine sense of belonging. Lambrinidis (2014) found that many students from non-traditional backgrounds, such as those entering university from an enabling or access programme, lack the confidence and skills to fully engage in online learning. According to Stone et al. (2016, p. 149), online learning is characterised by 'technical problems, lack of interaction with tutors and other students, problems with instructional materials and students' own difficulties with time management'. While such problems are not unique to online learners, they can represent bigger obstacles to those who are studying at a distance.

Perhaps as a result of the challenges described above, online and distance learning are associated with high rates of attrition, both internationally and domestically (Brown et al., 2013; O'Shea, Stone, & Delahunty, 2015). An Australian Government Department of Education and Training (2015) report on the completion rates for domestic bachelor students who commenced their studies in 2005 and finished by the end of 2012 found only 44.1% of 'external' students finished their studies, compared with an 'internal' completion rate of 75.4%. The rate of success for blended learning, at 69.5%, was higher than that of totally online learning, therefore suggesting the positive impact of some face-to-face contact. A report by the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (2017, p. 36) confirms that higher education providers with high numbers of external enrolments are associated with higher levels of attrition. This trend is reflected in the enabling context where distance students have less chance of articulating to undergraduate study than internal students (Bookallil & Harreveld, 2017). On the face of it then, online learning might not seem the best option for students in enabling programmes.

The subject, Preparation Skills for University (PSU), which provides the focus of this study, has a high proportion of online students: each year there are approximately 900 online students (around 60%), and 600 internal students across 10 campuses. Offered in three terms, the subject is only available online in Term 3. In an effort to make online learning as equitable as possible with the on-campus experience, the online cohort is divided into smaller groups of around 50–60 students, and each is designated a support lecturer, whose role is to be the 'go-to' person for the student. This lecturer contacts their students throughout the term, usually by email, but phonecalls are also made as required, and more recently meetings have been arranged using Zoom video-conferencing. As well as contacting non-active students, support lecturers send email messages of encouragement and congratulations. They monitor student online activity via an online 'early alert' analytics system that highlights students at risk. In these ways, the support lecturer plays a pivotal role in helping the subject coordinator address the needs of online students in this subject.

Theoretical framework: supporting the 'whole' person

In prioritising personal support, the underlying assumption here is the value of a 'holistic' approach, or one that views the student as a 'whole' person. Although theoretical justifications are not always provided, the 'whole-of-student' approach is a common theme in government reports (e.g. Pitman et al., 2016) and in the higher education literature, particularly in the context of attrition-retention and the 'first year experience'. Reason, Terenzini, and Domingo (2007), for example, maintain that successful outcomes for students in higher education are linked to academic, social and personal competencies. Similarly, Nelson, Duncan and Clarke (2009, p. 2) draw links between rates of retention and levels of support that 'promote student personal, social and academic engagement' in the critical early stages of the student journey. Research suggests that the more personal aspects of online study have a significant impact on all levels of student engagement and activity (Lear, Ansorge, & Steckelberg, 2010), particularly for those students from disadvantaged backgrounds (Devlin, Kift, Nelson, Smith, & McKay, 2012). The need to acknowledge the multiple facets of student learning is also emerging in the online learning literature. Tait (2000), for example, acknowledges the cognitive, affective, reflective and systemic aspects of learning in supporting students in the online environment.

A number of adult learning theories can be used to support such assumptions. Examples include Knowles' model of 'andragogy' which assumes that adult learners are autonomous and growth-oriented (Merriam, 2001). Although initially criticised for its lack of socio-emotional perspectives, the theory has evolved into one that embraces such contextual concerns: 'andragogical approaches require a psychological climate of mutual respect, collaboration, trust, support, openness, authenticity, pleasure and humane treatment' (Pratt, 1993, p. 19). A key theorist in this space is Jarvis (2010) who highlights the role of 'nurture' in the social context of adult education and lifelong learning. Similarly, the transformative experiences of adult learners are cast in terms of the personal and emotional, as well as the academic, in theories of 'transformative learning' (Cranton, 2016; Mezirow, 1995) and 'liminality' (Meyer & Land, 2006). Wenger's (1998) work in 'communities of practice' also goes some way to foregrounding the social and emotional dimensions of adult learning and students' need for acceptance and community.

Broadly speaking, all of these theories are informed by a humanistic philosophy that has as its core belief 'the freedom, dignity and potential of humans' (Brockett, 1997, cited in Tangney, 2014, p. 267). Two influential theorists to emerge from this tradition in psychology are Maslow and Rogers. According to Maslow's hierarchy of human needs, fundamental to all forms of human activity, including learning, is a need for 'love and belonging' (1970, cited in Jarvis, 2012, p. 47). Like Maslow, Rogers believed in the innate motivation of human beings to understand their true nature and capacity (Tangney, 2014). His notion of 'whole person learning' (Rogers & Freiberg, 1994, cited in Tangney, 2014, p. 266) mainly applies to school settings, but also has relevance to higher education (Heim, 2012; Tangney, 2014). This 'student-centred' approach rests on a range of principles, including the benefits of self-directed learning and the role of the educator as facilitator, but it is his work in 'climate setting' (Heim, 2012) that is of relevance here. Three attitudinal conditions are needed to ensure that the climate for learning (or

counselling) is optimal: 'congruence' or genuineness; acceptance based on 'unconditional positive regard'; and empathic understanding (Rogers, 1959, cited in Miller, 2012, p. 6). The dynamics of an online learning environment in higher education are very different from the face-to-face interactions within an elementary classroom, but perhaps the broad aim of establishing a climate characterised by genuineness, acceptance and understanding, alongside appropriately scaffolded academic support, is worth exploring.

Therefore, for the purposes of this study, a 'holistic' understanding of learning is one in which students' personal (emotional/social) and academic needs are considered, and priority is given to creating a positive, supportive learning environment (climate) to maximise students' potential. This study aims to determine how well online learning can support a holistic approach, thus meeting the personal as well as academic needs of students transitioning to university.

Research questions

- How can a 'holistic' approach to learning be achieved in an online environment?
- How do levels of support experienced by online students compare with those of on-campus students in a subject in an enabling programme?
- What aspects of support best meet the personal (social/emotional) and academic needs of these online students?

Research approach

As well as being informed by humanistic sensibilities, this research comes from an essentially constructivist perspective, in that it acknowledges the subjective, socially mediated construction of reality, and the influence of the researcher's values in the research process (Mertens, 2015). As a coordinator of the subject that provides the boundary for the study, my own connection to the research needs to be foregrounded. In line with case study design, the aim is to provide 'an in-depth understanding of the situation and the meaning for those involved' (Merriam, 1998, p. 19). The participants in this study are online students who have completed an introductory study skills subject in an enabling programme. Some numerical data are reported, but are used descriptively rather than for a fine-grained statistical analysis, thereby making this study predominantly qualitative in nature. In line with the advice of Merriam (1998), a theoretical framework guides the study, that being the model of 'holistic learning' described earlier.

Phase 1: subject evaluations

The first phase was to examine anonymous evaluations for the subject called Preparation Skills for University (PSU) for three terms. These online evaluations, initiated at a university level, appear on the subject's Moodle (learning management system) site towards the end of each term. Students are strongly encouraged to complete these surveys, but this is not a compulsory exercise. Although demographic profiling of participants is not possible beyond knowing their mode of study, and the open-ended nature of the survey means there are limits to its validity, these voluntary and anonymous responses do provide useful insights into broad patterns of student thinking.

As well as quantifying students' levels of satisfaction, qualitative data were also available via two optional open-ended questions: 'What was the best aspect of this unit (subject)?' and 'What would you suggest for improvements to the unit (subject)?' These verbal comments were sorted and coded using the basic tenets of thematic analysis (Bernard & Ryan, 2010) and facilitated by the online analytical tool NVivo. The overarching code category or 'theme' that guided this analysis was that of 'support'. Trying to code comments as 'personal' (social/emotional) or 'academic' types of support proved difficult at times, because of the inherent interconnectedness of these themes; therefore, the focus became the specific aspects of the delivery and communications that students viewed as helpful or supportive. Being guided by concepts related to a holistic approach but also being open to new concepts emerging from the coding process made this analysis both inductive and deductive.

Phase 2: online survey

An online survey, generated by Survey Monkey, was designed to probe these themes more deeply and provide more targeted data. I emailed students who had completed the subject in 2016 Term 3 (290 online students) and 2017 Term 1 (286 online students, 315 internal) to elicit participation. Access was possible because of my role as unit coordinator, and ethical clearance was secured. A possible limitation is that only the more engaged students were likely to respond to the survey, since some students were still enrolled, but inactive by the end of term. However, the comparison between the responses of online and internal students remains valid, since the same conditions apply. Completed surveys were received from 53 internal students (response rate 16%) and 96 online students (response rate 34%). Since the main focus of the study was to provide insights into the experiences of online students, it was appropriate to include a higher proportion of responses from this cohort. The demographics of participants, as shown in Table 1, is typical of the student cohort in this subject, except for males (internal and online) being slightly underrepresented.

The survey instrument (see the Appendix) asked students to rate specific aspects of communication and delivery. Students were also invited to write comments about each aspect. All questions were optional, which accounts for changing totals in response rates. Some of the questions were adjusted to be context appropriate for online and internal students, thereby necessitating two versions of the survey, but the majority of questions were exactly the same.

Findings

An analysis of three subject evaluations provided valuable background information for this study. Table 2 sets out the number of students who responded, the rate of response for each of the chosen terms, and overall satisfaction levels.

When the programme in question began offering subjects online in 2007, the expected satisfaction rates for online students were less than those for the whole cohort (internal and online). Clearly, the assumption in the early years was that we could not offer the same quality of service to online students, and therefore could not expect the same level of satisfaction from them. However, over the years, the gap between the satisfaction rates for online students and the whole group has closed, as evidenced by

Table 1. Demographics of survey participants.

	Internal (%)	Internal (n = 53)	Online (%)	Online (n = 96)
Age				
18–24	28%	15	18.5%	18
25–34	32%	17	38%	37
35–44	21%	11	25%	24
45 & over	19%	10	18.5%	18
Gender				
Male	21%	11	21%	20
Female	79%	42	78%	76
Prefer not to specify			1%	1
Mode of study in STEPS				
Part-time	40%	21	68%	65
Full-time	60%	32	32%	31
Years since prior study				
1–2	30%	16	15.5%	15
3–5	10%	5	16.5%	16
6–10	17%	9	24%	23
More than 10	43%	23	44%	42

Table 2. Subject evaluations – Preparation Skills for University (PSU).

Term	Overall Satisfaction Score (Likert Scale 1–5)	
	Whole group (internal & online)	Online students
2014 Tm 1	4.5	4.4
2015 Tm 1	4.5	4.5
2016 Tm 1	4.6	4.7

Table 2. In fact, the approval rating from online students was slightly higher than that of internal students in Term 1 of 2016.

The qualitative data from these evaluations were analysed for themes related to support, and comparisons were made between the internal and online cohorts. **Table 3** details the number of written comments included in these evaluations, and the proportion of those considered to be positive in nature, rather than neutral or offering some kind of criticism. Many of the students provided two comments per evaluation in response to the two open-ended questions: what they liked best and suggestions for improvement.

There is a looseness about some aspects of the data from the subject evaluations that needs to be acknowledged; for example, sometimes students included positive comments in the section about suggestions for improvement, and, less frequently, negative comments in response to what they ‘liked best’ about the subject. In such cases, these comments were labelled ‘positive’ or ‘negative’, irrespective of where students included them. Comments such as ‘nil’ or ‘nothing’ in response to suggestions for improvement were counted as ‘positive’. Where remarks were clearly off-topic, they were not counted in the data. However, of the qualitative comments provided, it was clear that the

Table 3. Feedback from subject evaluations for PSU.

	2014		2015		2016	
	Online	Internal	Online	Internal	Online	Internal
Students who gave feedback	165 (58%)	180 (79%)	152 (60%)	159 (67%)	113 (43%)	145 (50%)
Comments	143	169	121	155	96	175
Positive comments	111 (78%)	132 (78%)	92 (76%)	117 (75.5%)	72 (75%)	143 (81%)

Table 4. Breakdown of positive comments – subject evaluations.

Positive comments about ...	2014		2015		2016	
	Online (n = 111)	Internal (n = 132)	Online (n = 92)	Internal (n = 117)	Online (n = 72)	Internal (n = 143)
Lecturers (support and communication)	27 (24%)	31 (23.5%)	20 (20%)	28 (24%)	18 (25%)	28 (19.5%)
Students (discussion forums, class interactions)	0	11 (8%)	1 (1%)	11 (9%)	0	13 (9%)
Online resources (including lecture recordings and overview videos)	18 (16%)	6 (4.5%)	12 (13%)	3 (2.5%)	7 (10%)	3 (2%)

majority in each of these terms were positive in nature, rather than providing criticisms, constructive or otherwise. Table 4 illustrates the three support-related themes that commonly appeared in these evaluations for the terms under review.

Both the online and the internal cohorts had a significant number of comments expressing their appreciation for the support from their lecturers and the communications received. Not surprisingly, perhaps, online students volunteered more positive comments about online resources, while on-campus students had more to say about the significance of their fellow students and the classroom environment.

These patterns translated into the three broad themes that will now be discussed in more depth: *support from lecturers*; *support from students*; and *support from online resources*. The emphasis from this point turns to the survey data, since this was the instrument designed, in part, to probe these specific issues; only the survey questions of direct relevance to those themes will be discussed. However, in reporting these findings, quotes from both the subject evaluations and the online survey are included to illustrate key aspects. It should be noted that online students refer to themselves as ‘distance’ students, since this was the terminology in use at this university at the time. Demographic factors, such as gender and age, did not emerge as having any particular significance in the data from the online survey. However, the similarities and differences between responses by online and on-campus students were of particular interest. Most survey statements were rated according to the following categories: Strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A), Neutral/Non-applicable (N), Disagree (D), or Strongly Disagree (SD). Where variations occur, the headings are provided in full.

Support from lecturers

A significant proportion of online students in the subject evaluations nominated ‘support’ – in general terms, and sometimes referring specifically to their lecturers – as ‘the best aspect of the unit’. In order to explore this theme in more depth, a series of questions on the survey were dedicated to this aspect, as illustrated in Table 5.

The majority of surveyed online students appeared to be as satisfied with the support they received from their lecturers as their on-campus peers. While internal students agreed more strongly about some statements, the overall results were surprisingly similar. For example, over 95% of online and internal students agreed (SA or A) that they knew that ‘help was not far away’, while 89% of online students agreed (SA or A) that they felt the PSU lecturer(s) ‘cared’ about their learning, compared with 96% of internal students. The question that deviates from this pattern is the one about lecturers’ responses to questions: 98% of internal students agreed (SA or A) their lecturer was

Table 5. Support from lecturer(s) – survey responses.

Survey statements	SA	A	N	D	SD	Total					
Emails from my support lecturer were helpful to me.											
Internal students	36%	18	50%	25	12%	6	2%	1	–	–	50
Online students	29%	27	20%	18	46%	42	4%	4	1%	1	92
I knew help was not far away, if I needed it.											
Internal students	65%	32	33%	16	–	–	2%	1	–	–	49
Online students	54%	49	42%	38	3%	3	1%	1	–	–	91
I felt like the PSU lecturer/s cared about my learning.											
Internal students	65%	32	31%	15	2%	1	–	–	2%	1	49
Online students	47%	42	42%	38	9%	8	3%	3			91
When I asked a question, the lecturer was helpful.											
Internal students	68%	34	30%	15	–	–	2%	1	–	–	50
Online students	42%	39	26%	24	30%	28	2%	2	–	–	93

responsive, compared with only 68% of online students. However, the fact that 30% of online students responded with ‘non-applicable’ may indicate these online students did not ask any questions at all.

Comments from online students in the subject evaluations and online survey confirm a sense of satisfaction with the level of lecturer support:

- I really appreciated the kindness from lecturers ... For me working full time and having not studied for ten years it was rather daunting at first but with all the encouragement and support available I really enjoyed my first term. (Subject evaluation, 2014, Term 1)
- Sometimes it can be daunting going into distance study ... but I never felt like I was alone and if I ever had questions, I knew that they would be answered ASAP. Emails were a huge help and my main support system. (Online student, survey)
- The best part about the support I received was emails. I didn’t feel alone and knew any answers to questions I had were an email away. (Online student, survey)

The vulnerability of these students, who use words such as ‘*daunting*’ to describe their feelings, may account for their sense of gratitude for the responsiveness and ‘*kindness*’ of their lecturers. Students knew answers ‘*were only an email away*’ and that queries ‘*would be answered ASAP*’. Such responses suggest that these lecturers were viewed as being genuinely caring and reliable.

Support from students

According to the subject evaluations, contact with other students was more critical for internal students than their online peers (see Table 6). Internal students were more likely to mention the class atmosphere or contact with other students as what they enjoyed most about the subject. This impression was reinforced by the survey data with over half of the surveyed internal students agreeing (SA or A) that the support of fellow students was ‘important’ to them, compared with only about a quarter of online students.

Very few mentions of discussion forums were found in the unit evaluations under review. In PSU, forums are typically busy at the start of term, but the level of activity tends to peter out, despite a concerted effort made by support lecturers to ensure there

Table 6. Support from students – survey responses.

Survey statement	SA	A	Neutral	D	SD	Total
Support of other students in PSU was important to me						
Internal students	28%	14	31%	16	33%	17
Online students	3%	3	23%	21	52%	48
				6%	3	2%
				17	4%	4
						93

Table 7. Participation in Moodle discussion forums – survey responses.

Survey statement	Sometimes	Regularly	Not at all	I mostly only read them	Total
I participated in PSU Moodle discussion forums ...					
Internal students	17%	9	2%	1	33%
Online students	34%	32	13%	12	13%
				48%	17
				40%	25
					93

is ‘teacher presence’ on each forum. Further probing via the online survey revealed that many students chose to read the forum posts rather than participate. As [Table 7](#) shows, online students used the forums more than internal, and 40% of online students admitted that they ‘mostly only read them’.

There could be a number of reasons for this, but one theme to emerge from the survey comments is that some online students were discouraged by the lack of activity on the forums:

- I found it hard to talk to other students and will admit I was a bit lonely. I often commented and replied to fellow students’ comments but very rarely received responses.
- The level/degree of engagement throughout the discussion forums was rather disappointing

The lack of discussion amongst peers may have contributed to the overall rejection of the idea that support of other students was important for these online students. However, other students indicated in the survey that they were not particularly interested in communicating with other students:

- Distance studies for me mean independent studies
- I feel and prefer to share with my course [subject] coordinator. I think it might be a ‘distance’ thing, and also because I’m working full time.

For those looking for connection with their peers, the lack of online discussion was disappointing, but this lack of contact was not perceived as a problem by all.

Support from online resources

While the provision of suitable online resources may not immediately suggest anything other than academic support, an analysis of students’ responses shows that there may be a more personal element to this as well. Because online students negotiate the online space without the immediate help of other students or a lecturer in the classroom, they are likely to depend more on the online resources than internal students. Therefore, it is not surprising that online students commented more often than internal students on

this aspect of the subject in the end-of-term evaluations when nominating what they 'liked best'. There were two specific aspects that drew attention: the weekly lecture recordings and the short 'talking head' overviews of modules and assessment tasks, presented by the subject coordinator:

- I am a Distance student and found the weekly lectures invaluable. Being able to watch the lectures made me feel more connected to other students and towards the staff. (2014, Term 1)
- The lectures were the best part! Even though I'm a distance student I felt like I was part of the class! Thank you so much! (2016, Term 1)
- I enjoyed the weekly overview and lecture videos. I felt more connected to other students and lecturers through watching them each week. (2016, Term 1)

This appreciation was reinforced by the survey data (see Table 8), with 96% of online students and 91% of internal students agreeing (SA or A) that the online resources in PSU assisted their learning. As one online student commented on the survey: 'I found [the online resources] ... helped me to feel connected to the [unit] and broke up the feelings of isolation from being a distance student.'

The main purpose of the lecture recordings and 'overview videos' is to convey subject content and general reminders. However, over 70% of surveyed online students agreed (SA or A) that lecture recordings helped them 'feel like [they] were part of the group', while approximately 80% agreed that the shorter 'overview videos' helped to make the study experience 'more personal'. The references to feelings of connection and belonging in these students' comments highlight the potential of the online resources to fulfil students' needs on a number of levels. The tone of communication is also significant: 'Jaymie* is a fantastic lecturer. To me, even though i am by distance education, she feels like she really cares for her students and really tries to make things are understandable as she can' (Subject evaluation, 2014, Term 1, *pseudonym used). Taking the time to ensure that students understand key concepts may be viewed as a demonstration of genuine concern and empathy, thus contributing to a positive learning environment.

Table 8. Support from online resources – survey responses.

Survey statements	SA	A	N	D	SD	Total					
The online resources in PSU helped my learning											
Internal students	40%	21	51%	27	9%	5	–	–	–	–	53
Online students	56%	52	37%	34	7%	7	–	–	–	–	93
The lecture recordings were helpful to my learning.											
Internal students	29%	21	29%	27	35%	5	7%				53
Online students	53%	50	35%	33	12%	11	–	–	–	–	94
The short overview videos were helpful to my learning.											
Internal students	25%	13	42%	22	27%	14	6%	3	–	–	52
Online students	41%	38	43%	39	14%	13	2%	–	–	–	90
Lecture recordings helped me feel like I was part of PSU group											
Online students	32%	30	40%	37	25%	23	3%	3	–	–	93
Short overview videos on PSU Moodle helped make the study experience more personal											
Online students	37%	34	42%	39	22%	20	–	–	–	–	93

Discussion

The role of the lecturer has emerged as a critical aspect of support for online students in this study. Regular communication seemed to go a long way to helping these students feel included and respected. They greatly valued having a go-to person who seemed to genuinely care about their learning and understand their needs. The importance of the lecturer–student relationship in the online learning environment is not a new concept. What is significant about these results is how comparable the responses of online students were to their on-campus peers, as reflected in overall satisfaction scores for the subject, and also in the survey responses. Though definitive cause–effect statements should be avoided in a study of this kind, these results suggest that the model of support used in this subject – where cohorts are broken into smaller groups – is having a positive effect.

Direct contact with other students, however, did not emerge as a significant aspect of support for most online students in this study, especially in comparison with the internal cohort. When questioned about this in the survey, only a small minority of online students identified as being regular users of the forums and some indicated that they had been discouraged by the lack of activity. However, others made it clear that connecting with other students was not a priority. This finding is supported by the work of Brown et al. (2013, p. 70), who explained that some online students actively seek out support for ‘discussion, reassurance and feedback’, but others, the ‘lone wolves’, are more self-sufficient and less inclined to reach out for social interaction. This would suggest that not all online students are interested in engaging with other students, irrespective of the opportunities to do so, or how much lecturers would like them to. However, a vibrant online space for discussion has been achieved in other contexts in the programme under review, allowing students to engage in critical thinking as well as connecting with each other (McDougall, 2015), so further trialling of approaches may be needed to facilitate meaningful online student interactions.

In analysing students’ responses, the very nature of support comes into question, since attempts to define the type of support as either ‘academic’ or ‘personal’ mostly proved futile. Effective online resources, for example, can be supportive of students’ learning, ostensibly meeting their academic needs, but can also humanise the learning experience. Students in this study particularly appreciated the lecture recordings and video presentations featuring their subject coordinator. Similarly, regular communications from lecturers and prompt responses to questions seemed to help students feel connected, regardless of the nature of the subject matter. Although not the focus of this study, it also stands to reason that appropriate scaffolding and guidance in all aspects of the curriculum and assessment can contribute to a climate in which students feel their needs are met. No matter how ‘support’ is defined, a key aspect seems to be effective communication, both in the way that lecturers interact with students and in the design and presentation of resources. This style of communication is one that establishes a tone of warmth and empathy. Therefore, recordings featuring a friendly face can make a big difference in providing that human touch in the online environment. The power of ‘kindness’ in contributing to both pedagogy and meaningful online relationships should not be underestimated.

Such findings, which have a broader significance than just enabling education, suggest that if institutions are concerned about providing online students with holistic support, they will need to invest accordingly. A key aspect of the model described in this study is that of breaking a large cohort of online students into more manageable groups, and assigning a dedicated support lecturer to each. This is very different to the traditional model that sees a subject coordinator attending to the needs of a whole cohort, often comprising hundreds of students in a term of study. A more proactive type of support, whereby lecturers provide personalised encouragement and initiate contact, is more feasible when groups are smaller. However, the implications for budgets and staffing are clear. Such models of support do not necessarily fit the agendas of 'resource-starved institutions keen to maximise any efficiency gains that new learning technologies can offer' (Duranton & Mason, 2012, p. 81), and as Stone et al. (2016) observe, the time required to maintain a strong teacher-presence is not always reflected in workload allocations.

Conclusion

While online learning presents a number of challenges and will not suit the needs of all enabling students, generalisations about this type of study as being an essentially anonymous, isolating experience need to be challenged. This qualitative case study has explored the responses of enabling students studying online, and compared their reactions to those of internal students in the same subject. Significantly, the levels of support experienced by these online students were comparable with those of their on-campus peers. Online students were grateful for their lecturers' care and attention, and the model of providing a support lecturer for smaller student groups appears to be working from this perspective. In contrast, support from fellow students was not as significant in this study, with only a small minority of online students regularly using the online discussion forums. Online resources with a human touch, such as lecture recordings and short instructional videos, were perceived as helpful with their learning, but also gave online students that all-important feeling of 'connection', thereby blurring the distinction between the academic and personal aspects of support. This study has defined the concept of 'holistic learning' in a way that can help future discussions around models of support in online learning. It has shown that a nurturing and supportive environment is possible, and that online students do not necessarily feel 'distant' or excluded.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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Appendix

Survey questions: Support in Preparation Skills for University (PSU)

Unless stated otherwise, options were: Strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A), Neutral/Non-applicable, Disagree (D), Strongly Disagree (SD)

1. The PSU unit was well structured and easy to follow.
2. The PSU Study Guide was easy to use and helped my learning.
3. The pace of the PSU unit seemed to be about right.
4. Optional comment about structure of PSU and/or the Study Guide
5. The Moodle site for PSU was easy to use.
6. The online resources in PSU helped my learning.
7. Lecture recordings in PSU were helpful to my learning.
8. The short overview videos in PSU were helpful to my learning.
9. *Lecture recordings helped me feel like I was part of the PSU group.
10. *The short overview videos on PSU Moodle helped make study experience more personal.
11. Optional comment about the PSU Moodle site and online resources
12. Completing Learning Portfolios A and B helped my learning in PSU.
13. Feedback from these portfolios helped my learning in PSU.
14. The first quiz (about CQUni) helped my learning.
15. The second quiz (about Research Skills) helped my learning.
16. Optional comment about assessment in PSU.
17. I participated in the Prep Skills Moodle discussion forums.
18. The PSU Moodle discussion forums helped me feel like I was part of a group.
19. Support of other students in PSU was important to me.
20. Optional comment about contact with other students
21. Weekly updates from PSU Unit Coordinator were helpful to me.
22. Emails from my support lecturer in PSU were helpful to me.
23. Outstanding assessment in PSU ... personal reminders from my lecturer were helpful to me.
24. Phonecalls and/or personal emails from the PSU lecturer motivated me to keep going.
25. In PSU, I knew that help was not far away, if I needed it.
26. I felt like the PSU lecturer/s cared about my learning.
27. When I asked a question, the PSU lecturer was helpful.
28. Optional comment about communication with PSU lecturers.
29. *Even though I was a distance student, I felt like I was part of the PSU group.
30. My experiences in PSU met my expectations.
31. Based on my experience, I would recommend on-campus/distance learning.
32. (Optional comment) The best part about the support I received in PSU was ...
33. (Optional comment) One way I could have been better supported in PSU was ...

*Only asked of online students

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