# Julie Penno

Associate lecturer, Tertiary Preparation Program

MTESOL (*Deakin*), BEDC (*UQ*), BA (*Griffith*)

**Open Access College, University of Southern Queensland**

Sinnathamby Boulevard Springfield Central Queensland 4300

Phone +61 (0) 3470 4113

Email [julie.penno@usq.edu.au](mailto:julie.penno@usq.edu.au)

Corresponding author

Julie Penno is employed as an associate lecturer at the Open Access College of the University of Southern Queensland. She teaches predominantly into the Tertiary Preparation Program (TPP) specialising in study management and also facilitates the program online forum. Her interests are many and she has a particular passion for enabling students through education and witnessing the increase in students’ self-efficacy and transformation that occurs as they progress through the semester.

# Dr Barrie Todhunter

**Associate Professor Barrie Todhunter**

PhD *(USQ),* PCBS *(USQ)*, MBA *(USQ),* MPM *(QUT),* GradDipProjMgt *(QIT),* BArch *(UQ)*

MAIPM, MPMI

Project Management and Property Studies

School of Management & Enterprise

**Faculty of Business, Education, Law and Arts - University of Southern Queensland**

Sinnathamby Boulevard Springfield Central Queensland 4300

Phone +61 (0)7 3470 4537 - Fax +61 (0)7 3470 4501 - Mob +61 (0)418 763 453

email [todhunter@usq.edu.au](mailto:todhunter@usq.edu.au)

Research conducted at the University of Southern Queensland

# Abstract

This discussion paper provides insights into how a regional Australian university creates opportunities through distance education for students from increasingly diverse educational, social, geographic and economic circumstances to gain tertiary education that was previously denied to them. It explores through a qualitative approach how a tertiary preparatory program offered by a regional university that specialises in distance education has expanded the horizons for previously isolated and disadvantaged students by examining their experiences through their eyes. In particular, it explores the themes of openness and community. A preliminary conceptual framework is proposed to show the dimensions of open and distance learning in a tertiary preparatory program. That framework will be explored and refined as part of future doctoral studies.

Keywords

Distance education, online learning, enabling students, tertiary preparation program, forums

# Introduction

This discussion paper explores through a qualitative approach how a tertiary preparatory program offered by a regional university that specialises in distance education has expanded the horizons for previously isolated and disadvantaged students by examining their experiences through their eyes.

Australian universities now have to cater for the needs of a very diverse student group as a broader sector of the population seeks to benefit from the advantages of higher education. Due to Australian Government responses to shifts in the global economy, there is every likelihood student diversity will continue to expand. The Bradley Review (Bradley, Noonan, and Nugent & Scales 2008) recommended increasing university graduates by one third to enable Australia to actively compete in the global economy. In 2012, places at universities were increased (Dow 2013). The Committee for Economic Development of Australia (CEDA) report (2016) noted that due to technological advances, the existing labour market is changing and if people are to remain in employment, a greater cross-section of the community requires upskilling. Moreover, the report forecast unemployment figures are expected to further increase because of a combination of existing low employment figures in rural areas and an expected decrease in available jobs in rural, regional and metropolitan areas. These cohorts are ones that can benefit most from the ongoing development of learning environments that do not require frequent participation in face to face learning environments on traditional university campuses.

# Tertiary preparatory program (TPP)

The Tertiary Preparation Program (TPP) is an enabling program delivered by the Open Access College at the University of Southern Queensland (USQ) and students have the option to either attend on-campus lectures or study via distance education. The TPP is a fee-free course for Australian citizens and after successful completion of the program, students can move into undergraduate studies at USQ if all other requirements are met. For students who are enrolled in the TPP, this is often their first tertiary experience and many of them commence the program unsure and vulnerable. The simple experience of coming onto a university campus can be overwhelming and distract from their focus on learning new skills.

Currently, the TPP is a three-unit semester-long program and consists of three core units – an academic communication unit, a study management unit and a maths unit. All TPP course content has been designed so the student is well prepared when entering undergraduate study. Goldingay et al. (2014) found students achieve better results in first year tertiary studies when they were made aware of academic writing and time management skills. Christensen and Evamy (2011) also found students needed academic knowledge, study management skills and a social network at university to be successful. Interestingly, the TPP was originally designed as a distance program however due to student demand it is now delivered on campus in addition to online. All of the assignments have been designed so students can complete them with the resources that are available on the StudyDesk and also accessed through the online library. As many of the enrolled students are unable to attend on-campus lectures, extensive online support has been progressively built into the program. As students gain the skills and confidence related to tertiary study, they can then choose to participate in on-campus activities to foster those social networks.

# Participants in tertiary preparatory programs

Changes in the profile of university students will inevitably lead to increasing numbers of non-traditional students accessing higher education. In this rapidly changing educational environment, preparatory programs play an important role in providing access to further education or second chance learning for many students who hitherto have been unable to gain access to tertiary education for a wide range of reasons. Johns et al. (2014) found students’ participation in an enabling program not only increased their employment opportunities and confidence, but also raised the profile of the university in the local area. Furthermore King, Luzeckyj, McCann and Graham, (2014) suggested university studies, including enabling programs, contributed to positive student transformations.

For a number of students, enrolment into a preparatory program will be their first tertiary experience, and in many cases, they will be the ‘first in family’ to attempt higher education (May, Delahunty, O'Shea & Stone 2016; [Lisciandro &](http://search.informit.com.au/search;search=author%3D%22Lisciandro,%20Joanne%20G%22;action=doSearch) [Gibbs](http://search.informit.com.au/search;search=author%3D%22Gibbs,%20Gael%22;action=doSearch) 2016). Some of these students have previously been denied access to or have had negative experiences with education (O’Shea 2015; Cantwell & Grayson 2010). In order to complete the program successfully and transition into undergraduate study, students’ early sustainable engagement in enabling courses will increase the likelihood of successfully transitioning into their preferred undergraduate program, as well as initiating the development of healthy, independent, life-long learning habits (Bennett et al. 2015, p. 8). Preparatory programs also enable students to develop the necessary cultural and social capital in addition to the skills and attributes that are essential to achieve success in their studies (Zepke & Leach, 2005; Kift 2014; May, Delahunty, O’Shea & Stone 2016). However, there are numerous challenges that must be met for students to complete campus-based preparatory programs including self-doubt, lack of support, work commitments, family commitments, financial issues, lack of transport, procrastination, anxiety, fear of failure, and a sense of being overwhelmed by the experience of being on a university campus.

These challenges can lead to a reluctance to attend lectures which can quickly escalate to a sense of failure and the likelihood of withdrawal. Less threatening options for participation in preparatory programs can make a significant difference to their experience and improve the likelihood of their completion of the preparatory program and subsequent higher education studies. Many of these less-threatening options relate to open and distance education, where students can feel safer in their home environment while gradually developing the skills and confidence for effective study. They can also study at their own pace without the pressure to ‘keep up’ in a classroom environment where more confident students can tend to overwhelm less confident ones. Off-campus study provides the flexibility to study at the most convenient time in terms of family and work commitments, and a preference for morning or evening study time.

# Reasons some students study online

There is a multitude of reasons that students do not initially attend on-campus classes, and these include but are not limited to work, remoteness, financial concerns, mobility issues, family commitments, and psychological issues such as depression and or anxiety. Many of the non-traditional students need to balance study and work. Often mature age students with existing life commitments such as family, jobs, and a mortgage have little intention or immediate plan of decreasing existing employment hours to allow additional time to attend on-campus lectures. A decrease in income together with increased demands on their time would impact not only on their existing quality of life but also may further impact on other family members such as children’s extracurricular activities.

A number of students, especially in the younger age bracket, work in jobs where self-agency is low which often results in students having little or no influence over what hours they work. Unstructured work hours can impact on study negatively as previous research has revealed adverse impacts on studies and quality of life where students work long hours (McInnis & Hartley 2002; Halliday-Wynes & Nguyen 2014). There is however a number of students in existing full-time employment who successfully complete their studies. Morrison (2016) found that students who were aware of strategies to access available support during the course of their studies, whether the support was from home and or through the university, had a higher chance of continuing working full time and completing their studies successfully. The availability of off-campus support from the university increases the likelihood and proportion of successful outcomes for TPP students.

Given the challenging circumstances that such students face in finding time to attend scheduled lectures during working hours, flexibility is another key factor leading to success for students in preparatory programs (Stone, O’Shea, May, Delahunty & Partington 2016). Access to course content online, and the availability of resources partnered with regular online assistance are instrumental to the success of these students, particularly in enabling programs. After a non-linear arrival into higher education, students are often on a steep learning curve when they begin enabling studies. Although many online students live in regional and metropolitan areas and are unable to attend oncampus classes because of various commitments, researchers have noted a number of benefits for students studying online. James (2008) found that for rural-based students, accessing study resources online enables them to study in a tertiary program without financial expenditure on relocation whilst community ties are maintained. Online learning allows students to upskill at a time and place which is convenient to them (Gatta, 2003, as cited in Knightley, 2007; O'Shea, Stone, & Delahunty, 2015). Furthermore, in a competitive graduate employment market, being able to continue to work whilst studying can deliver additional benefits. Dacre Pool and Sewell (2007) explore graduate attributes which lead to increased graduate employability, some of which can be learnt whilst working.

Another benefit of online studying is the opportunity to make tertiary study appear less daunting for the student. Study at tertiary level, particularly for first in family students, can be intimidating not only for the students but also their families and members of their social network. By involving other family members in their study it can become less alienating for both the student and their immediate network. Students often involve family members in their study by asking for editing assistance (O'Shea, Stone, & Delahunty 2015). O’Shea (2015) writes of the little researched concept of familial capital whereby the family is used as a resource, not a hindrance to study. Unlike on-campus study, online study enables other people who are connected with the student yet not enrolled in study, to also view course content thus engaging them in study.

# Constraints to study

In the author’s role as a facilitator in the TPP program, observations over an extended period of time suggest that many of the TPP students face a number of constraints, particularly when embarking on the program. As suggested above, these include access to quality study time, anxiety, depression, decreased self-confidence, low levels of self-efficacy, procrastination and a lack of motivation. Many of the students are time poor as there are a number of existing demands on their time including family and work commitments before they even commence studying. Despite these constraints, many students report a positive education experience after completing the program.

Many of the TPP students do not attend on campus classes and receive their course information and material online. Mostly, these students’ contact with lecturers is via material presented on the StudyDesk, Blackboard classes, feedback on assignments and the social forums. To ensure an equitable experience for all students, educators need to not only provide pedagogically sound material online but to also establish opportunities which enable all interested students to maintain a connectedness with each other and with academic staff. TPP has large variations in the attributes of the student cohort and to successfully provide a quality learning experience and an opportunity to increase students’ positive academic identity, the course content and delivery must reflect the variations in the student populace and address constraints which can impede on the student’s opportunity for success.

Anecdotal evidence arising from discussions with on-campus students in the program indicates that some have difficulty even getting out of the car to walk to the university buildings to enrol or to attend on-campus classes. In situations where the challenges to commence are so extreme that they become debilitating, students can still attend university and engage in the program in distance mode which can enable them to succeed. Knightley (2007, p. 268) observed that “…students may find learning and interacting online less intimidating than meeting other students and tutors face-to-face.”

TPP is delivered on three regional campuses, one rural ‘outreach’ campus or hub and also into prisons and online. The regular student cohort comprises predominantly three groups - those who have no tertiary entry requirements; those who have tertiary entry level requirements from vocational institutions and have entry to university however feel unprepared for the work; and students who have been away from study for a period of time and wish to refresh study skills before entering into undergraduate degrees. This group also includes people who have been in primary caregiver roles and are upskilling in order to return to the workforce.

TPP has seen a steady increase in the number of students enrolled in the program every semester with semesters 1 and 2 having nearly one thousand students enrolled. There are fewer enrolled students in semester 3 over the summer which is to be expected as it is a shorter and more intensive learning experience. Aside from the regular semester-long TPP in semester 3, there is also a TPP Intensive course which runs over the summer semester and the semester long course is delivered in two 2-week blocks on campus. The Intensive program is HEPP funded, aimed at students from a low socioeconomic background who have just completed high school, are interested in a pathway to university and are able to attend oncampus classes.

# Encouraging student motivation and a positive academic identity

Based on personal experience with student cohorts to date, a pattern has emerged for successful outcomes in the TPP program based on five dimensions of the student experience. It is essential that these five dimensions are considered for all student cohorts, regardless of whether they study completely online, or whether they mix online and on-campus experiences. There are numerous factors that encourage student motivation and which lead to a positive academic identify, and these are discussed in greater detail in the five sections below. One of the key learning environments related to online learning which fosters motivation and identity is the forum.

The online forum is treated as a space similar to that of an online classroom and is staffed principally by one lecturer. Various response models have been trialled however it has been found that there is more student engagement on the forum when there is one predominant lecturer responding to queries. This enables the students to form an online relationship with the lecturer. Whenever a ‘visiting’ lecturer has answered a post, student comments cease on that thread. The semester examiner also has a presence, however, their role on the forum is understated. When the forum lecturer is unable to answer replies due to leave, another lecturer fills in and prefaces replies with “… is away so I am filling in until she returns.” This information contributes to students’ ownership of the online space. Threads are posted not only for assignment questions but also general study matters.

The use of the forum is mainly to provide answers to questions posed by students. There are some threads which do encourage greater discussion around different concepts covered in the course however these are much shorter than the threads pertaining to questions around assignments. These include but are not limited to, encouraging students to describe their study place, what child minding arrangements they are organising for the holidays, when they plan to study and what attributes and skills they have which will assist them to succeed in studying.

Many of the suggestions that Williams (2002, p. 265) makes regarding online learning are employed in the TPP Studydesk. Students can choose to view forum posts directly online or have a digest emailed once a day. There is also a course outline online with different clickable sections, hyperlinks to different resources and a progress bar. Contacting counsellors in Student Services is also encouraged and normalised. In addition there are lectures online, videos by different staff members discussing course content, live Blackboard classes, weekly online quizzes which although have not marks attached to them, contain very useful hints about upcoming assignments and different grammatical problems, such as the correct usage of the apostrophe.

Figure 1 illustrates the relationship between the five dimensions of the framework for success in completing a higher education preparatory program such as the TPP. The framework comprises the following five dimensions:

1. Availability of engaging study materials online
2. Student familiarity with Studydesk
3. Access to staff and staff approachability
4. Promotes online student engagement
5. Motivation and a sense of belonging in tertiary education

Diagram 1: Framework for development of a well-prepared undergraduate student

(Source: Produced by the author for this paper)

## Availability of engaging study materials online

All course material and additional supporting information are available online on the StudyDesk in weekly blocks. It is extremely well scaffolded with one StudyDesk for the maths component and at the time of writing, another StudyDesk for the combined academic communication and study skills course.

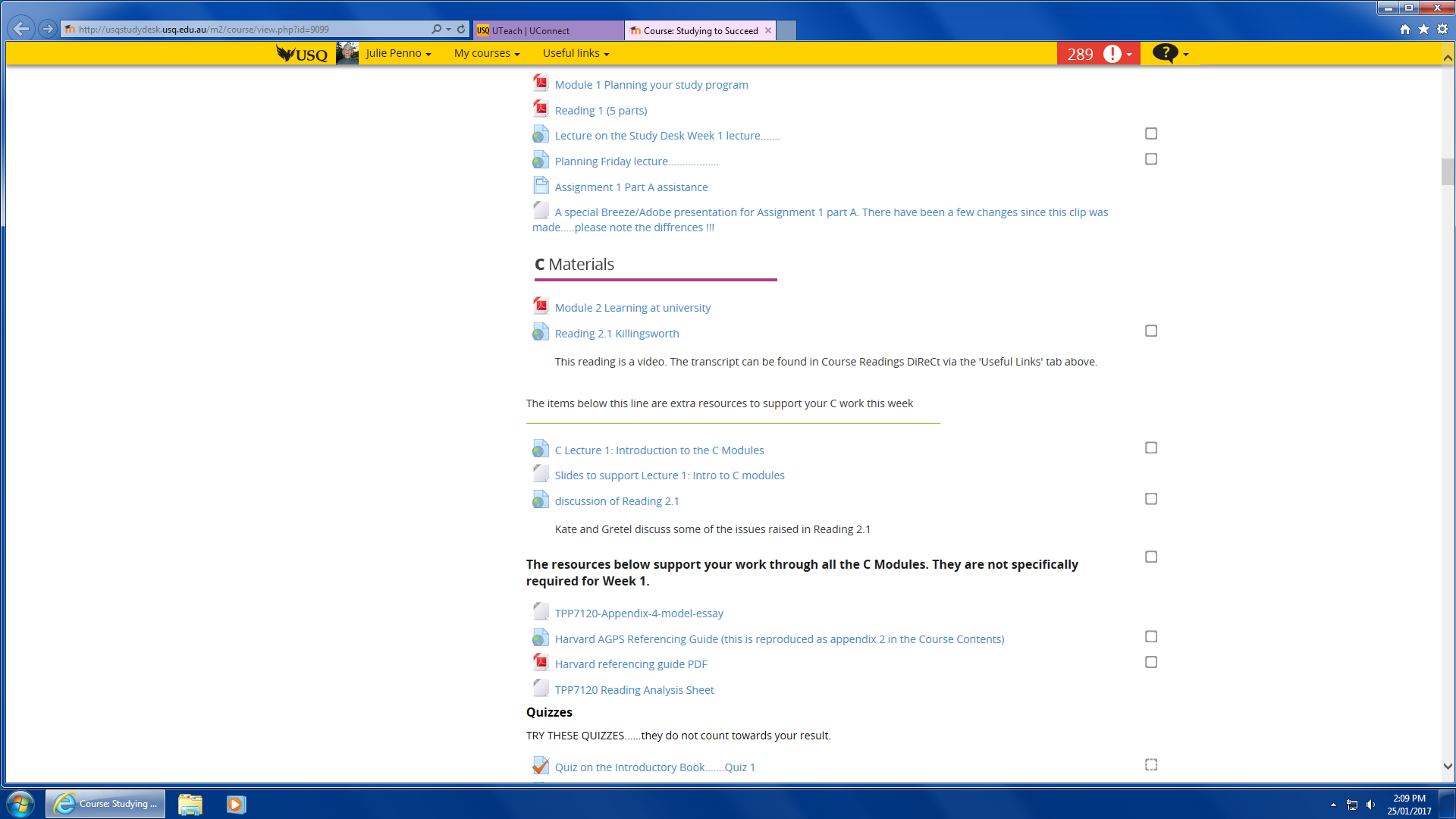


Figure one: A section of the material available on the Studydesk

(Source: Week 1, semester 2 part of the material available on the StudyDesk.)

## Student Familiarity with StudyDesk

During the program, students become familiar with how to access the online StudyDesk and utilise the online forum as a study tool. These new skills are essential and result in a much more confident commencing undergraduate student. All course content online is clearly labelled. Similar to the experiences of Lambrinidis (2014) and Goode (cited in Bennett et al. 2015), contents of the Studydesk have evolved to provide a richer learning milieu with ever increasing tailored resources to better engage the students. Students who have problems navigating course content have the opportunity to seek help through the forum and also through TPP support via a telephone helpline, staffed by administration employees who direct any course content questions to staff via email. When the TPP students enter undergraduate studies they are familiar with how to navigate the StudyDesk, find Course Content, engage on the forum and generally do not feel overwhelmed. After the final exam, an informal conversation with a student revealed her anxiety precluded her from attending on-campus classes and so she accessed all course content online and posted questions on the forum to clarify any expectations of assignments. Student, November, 2016. “Without forums, I don’t think I would have passed. You can look at a criteria sheet and not understand. Sometimes you need to read it in different language (other words).”

## Access to staff and staff approachability

The rationale behind answering the queries on the forum is to assist students, particularly off-campus students, in their development into self-sufficient confident learners by increasing self-efficacy and assisting in the transition process to undergraduate studies. This is achieved by a sustainable lecturer presence and actively working on establishing a positive relationship with students both online and face to face. “Social presence involves establishing a safe, respectful online space where students can collaborate and share ideas “ (Scoppio & Luyt, 2015). The forum also assists in breaking down communication barriers between tertiary staff and students. Furthermore it assists students with learning styles which are not ideally suited to online learning. Active lecturer presence promotes student engagement which can lead to student success. Contrary to Williams’ (2002) experiences on student online participation, students in the TPP program do tend to participate in online forum discussion groups and pose questions. This could be due to staff approachability and also because of advances in online communication, whereas people are now more willing to engage in online conversations. Pittway (cited in O’Shea et al. 2015, p. 44) is of the view that:

*…engaged staff is a prerequisite for engaging students; that respectful and supportive relationships are crucial; that students be encouraged to take responsibility for their learning; and that scaffolded support and clearly communicated expectations enable students to develop knowledge, understandings, skills and capacities of a high standard.*

Online students also have the opportunity to form student support groups online and privately message each other. Students also form study support groups and exhibit self-efficacy by forming and joining Facebook groups.

## Promotes online student engagement

Many students have work commitments which dictate their study times to be in the evenings and on weekends. To aid in student support and retention and continued engagement with the course, these students require answers to their queries when they are studying, not the next working day. While being able to access course content online allows greater diversity in the student cohort, it also can be a catalyst for greater attrition due to students losing interest in studying (Hughes, cited in O’Shea et al. 2015, p. 55; Bookallil & Rolfe 2016). Questions posed during a weekday are normally answered within a very short time frame and the forum is usually checked again throughout the evening and two or three times a day on the weekends. This has implications for the nature of online study as academic staff are not able to confine their support activities to a 9 to 5 work day. Dedicated staff are critical to the success of online study by establishing and maintaining student engagement.

Students are also encouraged to reply to each other when possible which also encourages self-efficacy. A near constant lecturer presence on the forum assists in keeping the forum a friendly and safe place for the students to visit and post questions. Furthermore, regular monitoring of the forum also enables any trolling to be removed very quickly which maintains a welcoming and secure environment for students to visit. Lambrinidis (2014 p.257) notes that “For students from non-traditional backgrounds, social presence in particular is vital to creating a learning environment conducive to students feeling connected to each other and their respective tutors.” Students’ queries are most often answered in a cheerful, concise manner which at times involves directing students back to the relevant course content to search for the answer. Occasionally when a student is repeatedly posting on the forum and they just do not seem ‘to get it’ a phone call can be made to assist comprehension.

1. Motivation and a sense of belonging in tertiary education

Tertiary education, particularly for many first in family students, is a continuous experience of unknowns. Their transition into tertiary education can be tempered through the experiences of friends and acquaintances who are already enrolled in university study. There is however, still the element of the unknown and this can be alleviated through regular online contact with the tertiary institution. The following extract from a student’s end of semester assignment provides a reflection of their time studying during November 2016, and reinforces the need for social contact and a sense of belonging:

*I found the Social Forum a very useful tool in my study process. It was very important for me as an external student. Many times I could find answers to my questions in the forums or if not, and I had to post my questions they were always answered very quickly…every time I started studying a new module or doing an assignment I looked through the whole module or all assignment tasks and then I went to Social Forum to look for answers to the questions I had or to find new ideas from my peers. I could locate the course Social Forum easily and I was relieved to know that I was not the only person with questions. It also made me feel the sense of community, which was something more difficult to experience but very important for an external student like myself.*

The forum helps students in dealing with feelings of bewilderment and inadequacy as it is a platform on which they can view other students who have the same questions and insecurities as them. The forum also contributes to building an online community.

# The role of curriculum and course content in preparing students for undergraduate study

## Time management

Successful study at tertiary level involves a number of factors, one of these being time which can be particularly important for off-campus students who do not have the imposed discipline of scheduled classes for on-campus students. It is critical for students to not only have access to blocks of uninterrupted quality study time but also to be made aware of what time may be available to them for study and how that time can be accessed. One of the first assignments students need to complete in the Study management modules of TPP7120 is a weekly study and ‘everyday life’ plan which consists of a series of three tables. By completing this assignment off-campus students in particular are able to see where gaps are available for quality study time and furthermore estimate the amount of time necessary to prepare for and complete assignments (May, Delahunty, O'Shea & Stone 2016).

In addition, students can also see how much time is available which they can spend on other non-study online pursuits such as Facebook or gaming. The study schedule has yet another function which assists in including other family members into the student’s life. Many students print out the detailed study time-table and place it in a highly visible space such as on the refrigerator, colour coding the planned study and free time. This has a dual function. The study schedule not only performs as a visible study reminder for the student but also as an informative and inclusive reminder for other family and household members of the new role and when the student would best benefit from a quiet uninterrupted environment.

### Internal and external restraints, constraints, procrastination and motivation possible inhibitors to student success

A student’s knowledge of their goals, motivation and constraints are significant factors which contribute to a successful study outcome. Many of the students in enabling programs are there because they have not experienced a linear study path to tertiary studies. This can result in the student having internal and external constraints to study which if left unacknowledged can interrupt their study journey. Internal constraints may encompass motivational issues, procrastination, and limited self-confidence in academic ability. External constraints can include geographical location, work constraints, access to childcare, family, and financial constraints. To successfully engage in online learning, students need to be self-motivated before they even open the StudyDesk page to engage with the course content. One of the TPP assignments requires students to acknowledge and write about their own goals, motivations, constraints and how they already are or planning to overcome them.

## Academic Communication modules

The academic communication modules introduce strategies for critical reading and formal academic writing. The process begins with learning how to write topic sentences, how to construct a paragraph and finally how to write an essay.

## Learning technologies

The role of the educator is to facilitate learning across multiple modes, not simply to impart information in a face to face environment – the proverbial sage on the stage – for learning to occur in an online environment, the lecturer needs to be available and to impart a social, cognitive and teaching presence (Garrison 2007). In the lecture room, the lecturer is physically present and can utilise a range of known strategies and technologies to encourage engagement. This can be done online as well but there is a range of issues of which staff need to have knowledge and understanding of.

Staff need to not only learn how to manage such issues, but to understand which technologies are going to enhance learning across all modes and which will not. Students also need to be online ‘savvy’ which can be a challenge for off-campus students coming from underprivileged environments. Some of the students have to share a computer with other household members and Morrison (2016) found in addition to learning academic skills, the students also needed to learn negotiating skills to have access to the computer and uninterrupted study time. Technological developments are constant and change is rapid and inevitable making it difficult to ascertain which technological tools will provide the most benefit for the student. Staff and students must be prepared for technological breakdowns. Lecturers need to be able to ascertain which tools will be pedagogically useful and which will distract or even inhibit learning for example, how Facebook impacts on students’ success. Both educators and students need to learn how to work effectively in the new medium.

# Conclusion

This paper has provided an overview of a tertiary preparatory program at a regional university from the perspective of one of the authors as a program facilitator, and has highlighted the additional challenges faced by students who are unable or unwilling to engage in a traditional face to face experience in a university lecture environment.

Personal experiences in coordination of the program have revealed a pattern of issues that are critical for successful learning outcomes and preparation for further university study. A framework has been developed and provided above to show the relationship between those issues, supported by a detailed discussion on each of those dimensions.

Observations indicate that a well-curated StudyDesk and regular lecturer attendance promotes student engagement and contributes to student success, and online study can lead to greater personalised learning for the student and a sense of belonging in the online tertiary community. Although this tends to require greater student support from the lecturer, particularly in large courses, it can lead to a richer educational experience for the student. Online learning support has the potential to become more personalised for the student (Carswell et al., cited in McInnis & Hartley 2002). From the provider’s perspective, online delivery and successful student engagement requires availability of more academic staff resources. Whilst there are many positives associated with online learning, it does command a greater level of motivation from the student.

Ongoing developments in the distance learning environment suggest that online learning is an expanding way of communicating, a new way of learning, and is different from participation in on-campus classes. It is more difficult for the student to adopt a passive role in their learning when they are accessing education through online resources as mostly there is no physical peer group. However with active lecturer presence on the Studydesk and forums, virtual groups can be developed and fostered to compensate for the lack of face to face peer group activities facing off-campus students. Experience shows that this involves continuing dedication and motivation from the student as well as from the supporting academic staff who must also be empathetic to the challenges of off-campus study. To encourage this continued participation by online students, the educator needs to provide an educational space which is clear and welcoming and to provide regular open communication channels with such students.

The framework discussed above will be explored in greater detail as part of an ongoing doctoral study by one of the authors. The observations to date will be examined and tested as part of a rigorous research project, and the framework will be revised and refined to provide a valuable model to assist coordinators of tertiary preparatory programs.

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