



University of Southern Queensland

Case study report

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This case study is one of eight studies which contribute to a wider project:

Shaping the 21st Century Student Experience at Regional Universities

<http://shapingtheregionalstudentexperience.com.au/>

Executive summary

The University of Southern Queensland (USQ) case study investigated whether two core first year nursing courses positively enhanced nursing students' confidence and competence as they made their transition to the new university culture. The data revealed that the two embedded and scaffolded courses assisted first year nursing students to become more familiar with the often unfamiliar and largely online regional university environment and to feel more confident as they attempted to engage and master the literacies they encountered there.

1 Introduction

1.1 Context

Established in 1967, USQ has three Campuses: the Toowoomba campus along with the Springfield and Ipswich Campuses in Brisbane's western corridor. USQ graduated 88,428 students over the period 1967 to 2013 and has over 28,000 currently enrolled students. Its student cohort is very diverse of whom approximately 34% are low SES students with many being first in their family to study at university. USQ is one of Australia's biggest providers of online (distance) education programs with more than 75 percent of its students studying via distance or online. Since 2014, all programs and courses are offered online with Moodle (or Study Desk) being the primary method/mode of delivery between learners and teachers.

1.2 Purpose of report

The report comprised Stage 2 of the Office of Learning and Teaching (OLT) project, *Shaping the 21st century student experience at regional universities* (Australian Office for Learning and Teaching Grant SP14-4602).

2 Case design

The case study investigated the experiences of undergraduate nursing students studying two compulsory first year core courses, *Building Professional Nursing Attributes A and B*, (CMS/MAT). The rationale for these courses was to empower students by embedding and scaffolding core online and university literacies. CMS/MAT's interdisciplinary whole-of-program approach replaced a de-contextualised, "bolt-on" skills course used to support commencing students (Krause, Hartley, James, & McInnis, 2005), where engagement and retention has been left to chance. The USQ case study investigated whether the courses assisted students to become more familiar with the largely online USQ environment and, in turn, enhanced students' experiences in transition, and in turn their retention.

2.1 Case study plan

Qualitative interviews were conducted with students and staff January-March 2016

2.1.1 Student interviews

Interviews investigating students' experiences of transition were guided by Kahu (2013). Questions related to students' backgrounds and pathways to university; students' transitions to USQ's largely online delivery of its courses; the core courses' effects on

students' cognitive and behavioural aspects of engagement; and their perceptions of performance and wellbeing, including personal growth.

2.1.2 Staff interviews

Questions related to staffs' perceptions of first year students' online learning and the effects of the core courses on their engagement and learning.

2.2 Theme

2.2.1 Theme title

Enhancing students' regional university experiences and learning skills through core literacy courses.

2.2.2 Theme description

Investigating students' backgrounds and their experiences in the core nursing courses and how these affected their transitions to and empowerment in the university culture.

2.2.3 Unit/Units of analysis

Qualitative data collected through student and staff interviews

2.2.4 Theme scope

Nursing students' experiences in first year in either a partial or full online mode

2.2.5 Participants

Students who studied the compulsory core first year nursing courses (CMS/MAT) and key stakeholders and staff involved in contributing to and/or investigating online literacy at USQ. Informed consent was obtained, with clear explanations of the research process provided but with identifying information not included in the reported findings.

2.3 Data Collection, management and Analysis

Interview data was subjected to thematic analysis using Grounded Theory.

3 Timeline

The case study was completed as follows:

Table 1 Case study timeline

	2015					2016				
	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May
Activities										
Invite participants		x	x	x						
Conduct interviews/ focus groups				x	x	x	x	x		
Conduct analysis							x	x	x	
Write report									x	x

4 Findings

4.1 Overview

Themes encompassed students' backgrounds and their initial negative attitudes towards technology, including digital apprehension and their perceptions of online versus face-to-face delivery, the courses' benefits in relation to students' experiences of transition and the relationships engendered by the courses which facilitated their engagement.

4.2 Description of themes

4.2.1 Participants' backgrounds and their unfamiliarity with university study

The experiences and backgrounds of the nursing students interviewed were diverse with the cohort including school leavers, mature age, distance and international students who had entered university via a range of pathways:

I finished at Grade 10, worked for about four and a half years doing just casual work ... I did adult tertiary preparation and did really well. And some of the teachers there would really encourage me "You should definitely consider Uni." (Mature-age third year nursing student)

I am from China, an international student studying at USQ. I came to study the English course at the Open Access College for 20 weeks. That was really good pathway to transfer to nursing. International third year nursing student)

A PhD researcher into digital apprehension at USQ reported that the diversity of USQ students' backgrounds negatively affected their transition:

Two or three weeks in, they're struggling – which emulates a kind of culture shock, because they don't have any concept, especially if it's like first in the family... they have no one that they can talk to about their university experience or if they're lower socio-economic, they haven't had the capacity to have the internet. (PhD digital apprehension researcher)

This researcher, who had conducted a pilot study of 766 USQ students, observed that students' discomfort with online delivery was widespread with three out of twenty students considering withdrawal because they couldn't cope with the technology. The researcher also found that one in three first year students were digitally apprehensive and further that some students did not possess basic online literacies. Interview data checked endorsed students' discomfort with online delivery: that it was inconsistent in terms of different course structures, time-consuming and confusing.

Often you wouldn't be able to get onto the website and the things would be slow to download or they'd crash, limiting study time for time-poor online mature age students. (First year student)

But when you first log on, you've got your ULearn, your UDo, your U-, and then you've got tabs everywhere, and you don't know what's important and what's not. The first few weeks of semester one, I didn't actually do any work. I was actually worried what I'd missed, and was just floundering around. (Mature-age third year nursing student)

Interview data confirmed that USQ's recent shift to online delivery was problematic, epitomising complexities arising from Kahu's (2013) structural elements. Difficulties were exacerbated by the idea that face-to-face delivery was often expected, appreciated and preferred by some students:

On campus, I found I've loved to be able to come in and talk to the lecturer, or talk to students, and you're in your group and you can sit and talk face to face, that contact. And your immediate response back is really great. (Third year nursing student)

Students' difficulties in transition were exacerbated by their expectations which were often at odds with the reality of university study at USQ. Devlin (2013) referred to this clash of expectations as socio-cultural incongruity, a mismatch frequently observed in students' evidence in the case study.

One course had readings and, lo and behold, I didn't realise some of the words were hyperlinks. They open a whole new world of questions. I found this out by accident and I was like "oh, you know". And then it's, like, "Well, what else have I missed?" (Mature-age third year nursing student)

Academics however understood and sympathised with students' lack of familiarity.

I came to realise that mature-aged students in particular don't necessarily have a digital literacy that's enough for them to study and to manage our systems. It's an ironic situation where all the information and the help to navigate those systems are actually also online, so that's a problem in itself. So what I learnt were the things that I don't think we give any credit to whatsoever, we don't think of as important become critically important when you're studying at a distance and you're only interface with the university is digital. (Head of School)

CMS/MAT academics and tutors empathised with the depth and breadth of the transition that students needed to make to succeed in their studies and recognised that they had an important role to play in expectation management, particularly in relation to students' rights but also their responsibilities and in developing students' self-efficacy:

Not knowing what they don't know because they don't know how to navigate around the culture of a university and it does take them six months to be able to do that and we teach some of that. (Mathematics academic teaching nursing students)

Learning to check an email was a huge challenge. So the idea of checking forums every day, watching lectures with a computer, having to do their work with a computer, figure out how to upload an assignment was, in some ways, just too much for them. And yet most of these students I'm referring to did complete the course and passed. (CMS1008 tutor and marker)

4.2.2 Benefits of the embedded approach adopted by CMS/MAT

The evidence revealed that, overall, the embedded nature of the first year nursing core courses positively contributed to students' transition. A nursing lecturer commented that the idea of being taught how to operate at university was much better than learning as "you go". The embedded approach was also appreciated by students who had assumed that they'll be left on their own and were grateful for the support offered.

MAT and CMS were a good way to ease me into assessment expectations, how to upload assignments, things like that. ... If it wasn't for those aspects that caused me to do, say, do that interview [an assessable activity in CMS], talk to different people, I probably would not still be at university. I would have dropped out. (Mature-age third year nursing student)

I couldn't have actually progressed without having done those courses, because I had such a deficit in that area of my knowledge. (Third year nursing student)

Students also recognised that the courses were applicable to their other courses, conceding that their development of self-efficacy assisted their retention at university.

If I didn't study the CMS1008, I can't pass the rest of the courses and I can't successfully continue my nursing degree. (International third year nursing student)

Staff evidence confirmed the positive role played by CMS/MAT

I can say without reservation that the core courses are set up very well at the beginning with the university environment and the online environment. (Nursing academic teaching third year courses)

There's a real need for it and the Geraldton students in particular were saying how helpful they found the content for both MAT and CMS. For a big majority of our students, it's absolutely what they need, and without it, they just flounder. (Head of School)

There were positive, if unintended, consequences for international students stemming from participation in CMS/MAT online forums:

Even though it's a faceless forum, they feel much more confident in expressing themselves perhaps because there is no facial expression or body. Anti-foreigner, anti-accent kind of body language signals aren't there. So they love it and they eventually learn to really enjoy the forums. ... And the forums may give those international students or students from a non-English speaking background a lot more

freedom to express themselves in a way that in a classroom they might feel the pressure of time. (CMS1008 tutor and marker)

4.2.3 The role of interpersonal relationships

A dominant theme in the data related to the sense of belonging engendered by the courses generally and by the relationships developed in the online forums and activities more specifically, thus corroborating engagement as a key element in Kahu's model:

"Wow, there are a lot of people in the same boat as me, and all different walks of life." And that was very reaffirming, "Yeah no, you're not alone in this." ... You weren't alone at all in the study, and it sort of made you feel like, "You're okay, keep going." Because everyone else is feeling a little bit like you're feeling. (First year student)

You get to know people because they'll be from all different places, and then you see them, and then you'll do another course and you'll see their names again, because you're sort of all going along, and you might overlap. And then you'll do a residential school and you'll go, "Oh you're you," you know. Then you get to meet people and form connections. ... So you're not so alone, and I think a lot of people feel that. (Third year external student)

Academics too recognised the importance of students' development of relationships, both with staff and fellow students and the positive effects these relationships generated in enhancing students' experiences and in their retention. Academics reflected that such relationships engendered feelings of belonging, so that students didn't feel that they were on their own. Rather that they were part of a larger community and that their learning experiences were not conducted in isolation but with other students who were feeling, thinking and experiencing life's everyday struggles in tandem with them.

In their reflection on the semester, they talk about how much they've grown as a person, connected with other people either via the online medium, when in other courses they have to do a presentation with people they're not going to meet with face-to-face or they have met people on campus as study buddies and so forth. But I love reading their reflections that say they've learnt a lot from this course, developed new skills, can see how they're relevant to the rest of their studies and can see how they're relevant to their future nursing careers. That's always delightful, as an educator, to see that you've done something right. (CMS1008 tutor)

Data revealed that the interactions between student and lecturer were important in assisting students to recognise that they can be heard without repercussions and that it not only an individual perception but one that was common to the cohort.

Because they usually are adults and they value relationships. And if they feel as if they're making a valuable contribution, they will make a valuable contribution. And just show them that you're human. ... I think if the lecturer answers within 24 hours, which I know is difficult, that's a very big benefit for the student because it helps their needs. (PhD digital apprehension researcher)

4.3 Observations from the case study

An unexpected finding related to the realisation that digital apprehension permeates throughout the whole of the university, not just in the first year. This may be exacerbated by the constant ICT changes. Another unexpected finding was that some students did not expect university to be difficult, or even that they would need to prioritise and plan for study. This may be the perception, a consequence of increased accessibility for regional students – because they were accepted into university, that therefore it would be easy, that they would just need to attend to and to pass the assessment. It may also transpire because many students were first in family and there was an absence of role models who could negate this assumption.

They have this expectation that they'll be fine because they don't realise the amount of work that has to go into a university degree. (Nursing academic)

The evidence illustrated that CMS/MAT also plays a key role in alerting students to the realities of university study and the amount of planning involved principally by its role modelling learning skills and through its goals in relation to expectation management:

First we tell them what they can expect from us and what we expect from them, very, very clearly. What their roles and responsibilities are and what our roles and responsibilities are. (Technology advocate)

5 Understanding the regional student experience

5.1 Relationship to the Kahu model

Case study data revealed synergies with the Kahu model: that students' backgrounds and prior experiences meant that they were unfamiliar with university. This was exacerbated by USQ's online delivery approach, which especially for those students enrolled in an on campus mode, was unexpected. The degree of digital apprehension experienced by USQ students was high and aggravated students' discomfort and anxiety. These findings emulated Kahu's structural influences stemming from the combination of the university culture and students' backgrounds. The case study revealed the benefits of embedding and scaffolding key competencies, including online literacies and academic literacy and numeracy through the two core nursing courses. As the evidence shows, the psychosocial influences accompanying the two core courses positively increased students' motivation, skills, identity and self-efficacy. In turn there were positive influences on student engagement, particularly, as the data uncovered, students' sense of belonging, interaction and participation. It can be inferred that proximal and distal consequences were in turn improved, though the first year nature of the courses meant that the support needed to be maintained through students' degree programs and into their professional careers.

5.2 Insights gained

Case study evidence illustrated that the embedded and scaffolded approach embodied by the core courses is successful in contributing to nursing students' transition, retention and success at a regional, largely online university. The case study also provides a good representation about how the Kahu model can be theoretically applied to contribute understandings about how the regional university student experience can be enhanced. Crossing inter-disciplinary boundaries enabled the courses to constitute an academic and social "organising device"—the glue that connects knowledge with students experiences.

5.3 Good practice example

The benefits of embedding and scaffolding key literacies in the first year nursing program at USQ.

The academic goals embodied in two core first year courses, CMS/MAT, included the development of students' online, information and academic literacies as well as their numeracy, learning and research skills. Consequences included an enhanced regional student experience through the psychosocial influences emerging from this university teaching and support, which increased students' growth in learning, self-reflection skills and identity as well as their self-efficacy. The online activities, forum postings and formative assessment coupled with immediate tutor feedback, positively influenced student engagement, including their sense of belonging, self-regulation and participation which in turn improved the proximal consequences of their academic learning and achievement as well as their social wellbeing.

Impact

MAT and CMS were a good way to ease me into assessment expectations, how to upload assignments, things like that. ... If it wasn't for those aspects that caused me to do, say, do that interview [an

assessable activity in CMS], talk to different people, I probably would not still be at university. I would have dropped out. (Mature-age third year nursing student)

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Implementing the practice

In their reflection on the semester, they talk about how much they've grown as a person, connected with other people either via the online medium, when in other courses they have to do a presentation with people they're not going to meet with face-to-face or they have met people on campus as study buddies and so forth. But I love reading their reflections that say they've learnt a lot from this course, developed new skills, can see how they're relevant to the rest of their studies and can see how they're relevant to their future nursing careers. That's always delightful, as an educator, to see that you've done something right. (CMS1008 tutor)

In conclusion the two embedded and scaffolded courses assisted first year nursing students to become more familiar with the often unfamiliar and largely online regional university environment by supporting them as they engaged and mastered the literacies they encountered there and thus succeed in their studies.

6 Implications

Recommendations for practice include the use of the USQ case study as an example of best practice, particularly for those regional universities whose programs are largely delivered online. Future directions could include the application to other disciplines across USQ and beyond to the online RUN universities. Further research evaluating these applications would also be beneficial.

7 Conclusion

Case study data revealed that the two embedded and scaffolded core courses assisted first year nursing students to become more familiar with the often unfamiliar and largely online regional university environment and to feel more confident as they attempted to engage and master the literacies they encountered there. The data demonstrated how the courses facilitate the regional student experience by enabling students' self-efficacy.

8 References

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9 Funding acknowledgement

Support for this project has been provided by the Australian Government Office for Learning and Teaching. The views in this project do not necessarily reflect the views of the Australian Government Office for Learning and Teaching.

10 Appendices

10.1 Appendix A: Interview protocol

Students were provided with the following information:

Your participation will involve participation in an interview that will take approximately 1 hour (in total) of your time.

The interviews will take place at a time and venue that is convenient to you.

Questions will include

- How confident in your online skills were you when you first began your online studies at USQ?
- What helped you to feel more comfortable and confident in studying online?
- What challenges did you/do you experience studying online?

The interview will be audio recorded.

Your participation in this project is entirely voluntary. If you do not wish to take part you are not obliged to. If you decide to take part and later change your mind, you are free to withdraw from the project at any stage. You may also request that any data collected about you be destroyed. If you do wish to withdraw from this project or withdraw data collected about you, please contact the Research Team (contact details at the top of this form).

Your decision whether you take part, do not take part, or to take part and then withdraw, will in no way impact your current or future relationship with the University of Southern Queensland.

10.2 Appendix B: Coding notes

Interviews were recorded, transcribed and analysed using NVIVO. Themes included:

- Uni support
- Transition
- Student roles and responsibilities
- Student background
- Resilience and power
- Print-online delivery shift
- Positive online access experience
- Negative attitudes towards technology
- International experience
- Embedded nature of course positive
- Digital apprehension
- Belonging

10.3 Appendix C: Illustration of CMS/MAT curriculum activity

Activity 2.1 Learning about the university (2).docx - Word

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FILE HOME INSERT DESIGN PAGE LAYOUT REFERENCES MAILINGS REVIEW VIEW

Arial 10 A Aa Font Paragraph Styles

Clipboard Paste Copy Format Painter

Activity 2.1 Learning about the university



Task
Interview an experienced student, reflect about what you have learned from them and post an entry to your group forum.

Instructions

1. Find a student to interview. This student could be from nursing or from any other faculty or even a different university. It doesn't matter. They might have finished their degree some years ago or be in second or third year nursing. You could also interview your online tutor or the Meet Up team. **Remember to use a pseudonym instead of your interviewee's real name in your reflection and in your post. This relates to your confidentiality and their privacy (two of your nursing codes of practice).**
2. Write up the interview, thinking about the strategies you can put into place to help you to succeed this semester. Keep this somewhere safe as you will need this information to complete Assignment 1, Part B.
3. By Friday week 2 post onto your group forum:
 - a) One surprising thing that you discovered from the interview that differed from the expectations you had about learning at university
 - b) One learning skill or strategy you are going to put in place to enhance your study this semester
 - c) One reason why Nursing might have included CMS1008 into your program of study?

Response
Your online tutor will reply to your post.

Link to assessment
Your reflection about the interview is a requirement for Assignment 1, Part 2
The forum posts contribute to your online engagement marks in Assignment 1.

Sparks
Watch this you tube video about the importance of getting online. Although it is from a different university it shows how important being present online is to university study in Australia (New Student Tip #08 – Get Online) <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L-peS-96GYE>

To prepare for your interview watch this you tube video. It should give you an idea of some topics to talk about. (New Student Tip #07 – Get Organised) http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1ab0p_oe1BU

Purpose
To gain insight into the languages and learning strategies or practices that you will need to develop to succeed at university.

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