

Faculty of Education Online Learning Commitments

September 2014

Synopsis

This document describes a set of commitments which have been approved by Faculty Executive regarding online learning within the Faculty of Education, phrased as a set of common elements of student learning experiences across the faculty. Consistent with a flexible and blended learning philosophy and with the idea that online learning is now a key aspect of student learning experiences regardless of whether a student is enrolled on campus or at a distance, the commitments encompass both on campus and distance student learning, while acknowledging that the key learning experience requirements will often be met in different ways for students in the different enrolment modes. The commitments were originally drafted in 2013 and have been refined to reflect a slight change in the expectations regarding synchronous sessions for distance students and a slight change to the timelines for implementation.

The commitments are as follows.

- 1. By 2015, students in all on campus and distance subjects will be able to access all learning resources online with resources including textual, audio-visual and interactive media designed specifically for online engagement;**
- 2. By the end of 2015, students in all distance subjects will regularly engage with their academic teachers and student peers through designed and facilitated online learning activities aligned to authentic assessment tasks. There will be a mix of synchronous and asynchronous activities and students unable to be present at synchronous sessions will have the opportunity to listen to and/or view recordings and undertake follow up asynchronous activities; and**
- 3. By the end of 2015, students in all on campus subjects will regularly engage with their academic teachers and student peers through designed and facilitated learning activities aligned to authentic assessment tasks. There will be a mix of face to face and online activities and some face to face sessions will be recorded to allow students to listen to and/or view recordings and undertake follow up online activities.**

This document outlines the background and original rationale for the adoption of this set of commitments and elaborates upon the key elements within each. The document has evolved through multiple versions and this version addresses key points raised during discussions at the 2013 Faculty Forum and at Faculty Curriculum Learning and Teaching and during Faculty Executive meetings in 2013 and 2014.

Introduction

From 2015 there is an expectation that study materials for all distance subjects in the faculty and the university will be delivered online, while there is an increasing demand from on campus students for flexibility in the way that they interact with peers and lecturers, including blending of online and face to face experiences. In this context it is important that academic and educational design staff are clear on the expectations of the faculty with regard to the online pedagogies underpinning the design of on campus and distance subjects and with regard to the student learning experiences these subjects will afford. This document outlines a set of commitments regarding online learning within the Faculty of Education, phrased in terms of a set of common elements for the learning experiences designed for students across the faculty. Consistent with a flexible and blended learning philosophy and with the idea that online learning is now a key aspect of student learning experiences regardless of whether a student is enrolled on campus or at a distance, the commitments encompass both on campus and distance student learning, while acknowledging that the key learning experience requirements will often be met in different ways for students in the different enrolment modes.

The commitments were originally drafted by Barney Dalgarno and were refined and expanded upon following consultation with Jenni Munday, David Smith and Jo-Anne Reid and with members of the BTeach review steering committee. This document has subsequently been through a number of revisions incorporating additional clarifications and additions emerging from consultation with Faculty Executive and the Faculty Curriculum Learning and Teaching Committee.

Background

In 2010 the Faculty of Education Flexible Learning Working Group developed a Flexible Learning Strategy which was ratified by the Faculty Learning and Teaching Committee and Faculty Board. The strategy was built on a broad collective understanding of the nature of flexible learning processes desired within the faculty which were articulated as follows:

1. Processes which provide flexibility for on campus students by combining traditional face to face teaching with alternative strategies such as resource-based learning and online facilitation;
2. Processes which increase the quality of the resources and facilitation provided to distance students while maintaining a high level of flexibility;
3. Blended learning processes which bring together on campus and off campus students and make available to all students resources and facilitation processes normally provided only to one cohort;
4. Processes which harness the incidental learning occurring outside of formal teaching and learning activities, including that occurring through collaboration and social interaction between students; and

5. Processes which maximise the synergies between University subjects, professional placements and community activities more broadly; and the degree of connectedness to the University that students undertaking professional placements and community activities experience.

Consistent with this understanding, a set of principles relating to flexible learning and teaching were agreed upon and these have been included here at Appendix A.

Since 2010, there have been a number of developments within the Faculty, the University and the sector more broadly which can be considered drivers for revising and strengthening these principles into a set of more specific commitments. Such developments include:

- MOOCs and their short term implications for increased engagement in online education by established universities with consequences for increased competition in online learning across all disciplines in the faculty and their potential long term implications for the 'unbundling' of the higher education product and the need for rethinking of learning and teaching business models (Anderson, 2013; Barber, Donnelly, Rizvi & Summers, 2013);
- Sector interest, and CSU investigations of 'Badging', that is, alternative means for students to gain credit/credentials for aspects of professional and/or academic learning (Matkin, 2012).
- A number of changes in the landscape regarding teacher education, the largest discipline within the faculty (Bruniges, Lee & Alegounarias, 2013).:
 - Enlargement in the number of providers of DE/online teacher education and implications for competition
 - The possibility of reduced on campus undergraduate enrolment in teacher education as a result of state government policy changes and consequently an even greater need for us to remain competitive in our post grad DE online teacher education programs
- The CSU strategy (http://www.csu.edu.au/division/plandev/strategy/2013_2015/index.htm) and the CSU Curriculum Learning and Teaching (CLT) framework and plan and in particular the statements about authentic learning, student engagement, online learning experiences and so on.
- The Smart Learning project and the opportunity it will afford for the design of courses with much clearer articulation of student learning experiences and much more explicit alignment between learning outcomes, learning experiences and assessment, and therefore the need to be clearer in our expectations with regard to student learning experiences.
- The CSU decision to adopt Blackboard as the platform for the new Learning Management System to be referred to as 'Interact 2'.

- The DVC-Academic's requirement that all study guides are delivered online by 2015 and consequently the need for a clear articulation of faculty expectations regarding online pedagogies (ie. to prevent minimalists moves of printed material online as PDFs without an underlying change in pedagogy).
- The development of a set of aspirational blended and flexible learning standards by the Flexible Learning Institute (<https://eportfolio.csu.edu.au/pebblepad/viewasset.aspx?oid=373908&type=webfolio>).
- The choice of Online Learning as the theme for the 2013 Faculty Forum and the consequential need for a set of underpinning goals which can both provide a basis for developing the program and also position the program within the wider agenda within the faculty.
- The decision to undertake major reviews of most teacher education courses during 2012/13/14 and alongside this the decision to review and rethink teacher education pedagogies which together have consequences for staff needs for professional development and practical assistance during 2013/14 as new and existing study guides and resources are developed or modified.
- The creation of Connected Learning Spaces on each campus providing new opportunities for cross-campus or multi-campus teaching.

The commitments

In this context, the following commitments have been developed which are intended to describe the core characteristics of student learning experiences in all subjects across the faculty. These commitments have been broken up into three parts: learning resources for all students, synchronous and asynchronous learning experiences for distance students, and synchronous and asynchronous learning experiences for on campus student. Synchronous learning experiences are experiences which occur at a specific time and which could be face to face or facilitated through technologies such as video conferencing or web conferencing. Asynchronous learning experiences are experiences which occur over a period of time drawing on communication technologies such as email and discussion forums.

The commitments are consistent with the principles within the Faculty Flexible Learning Strategy approved in 2010. In particular they draw strongly upon Principle 1, which calls for reduced delineation between face to face and distance education, Principle 4, which calls for clarity around the purpose of online learning designs, and Principle 7, which acknowledges the importance of both synchronous and asynchronous learning experiences. Other principles from the strategy will help to inform the process needed to enact the commitments across the faculty once approved.

The commitments are as follows:

1. **By 2015, students in all on campus and distance subjects will be able to access all learning resources online with resources including textual, audio-visual and interactive media designed specifically for online engagement;**
2. **By the end of 2015, students in all distance subjects will regularly engage with their academic teachers and student peers through designed and facilitated online learning activities aligned to authentic assessment tasks. There will be a mix of synchronous and asynchronous activities and students unable to be present at synchronous sessions will have the opportunity to listen to and/or view recordings and undertake follow up asynchronous activities; and**
3. **By the end of 2015, students in all on campus subjects will regularly engage with their academic teachers and student peers through designed and facilitated learning activities aligned to authentic assessment tasks. There will be a mix of face to face and online activities and some face to face sessions will be recorded to allow students to listen to and/or view recordings and undertake follow up online activities.**

The following elaborations on the key ideas and terminology within these commitments are intended to clarify the intent of and some of the thinking behind each commitment:

- Although the commitments apply to all students it is expected that they will be met in very different ways for different students. For example commitments about synchronous engagement will typically be met through face to face engagement for on campus student but online engagement for distance students. More broadly the specific strategies used to address the commitments will vary considerably from cohort to cohort.
- The intention of stating that students will “be able to access” all learning resources online is to imply an expectation on academic/design staff that all resources will be made available online, given that internet access is already an expectation for all students (<http://www.csu.edu.au/distance-education/what-is-distance-education/online-learning>).
- Requiring that students “be able to access” all resources online does not preclude the additional provision of some materials in other forms such as print or CD-ROM where there is a clear pedagogical or logistical rationale for doing so, however it is expected that the provision of resources in print or on CD-ROM would be very much a rare exception to the rule
- The expectation that some or all online resources would be designed specifically for online engagement does not rule out strategies that ensure that some of these resources are also print friendly in acknowledgement that some students do prefer to print resources for various reasons.

- It is acknowledged that while there is a long tradition of research on the development of online learning resources and the consequences of design decisions for student interaction, engagement and cognitive effort, it is not reasonable to expect all academic staff to be across this literature (see, for example, Harper & Hedberg, 1997; Mayer, 2005, Kennedy, 2004; Hill & Hannafin, 2001). Consequently the involvement of educational design staff who can help to apply key principles from this literature base to the design of learning resources is important.
- Although learning resources could be designed/developed/sourced using a range of different platforms and/or formats, reusability and sustainability are important considerations and consequently staff should be mindful of CSU standards and DSL supported reuse processes in selecting or developing resources.
- Academic and educational design staff should explore the option of using open educational resources (OERs) whenever possible to minimise the costs to students.
- For on campus students engaging “synchronously” will normally occur during face to face classes but may be supplemented by online synchronous activities.
- For distance students synchronous engagement will necessarily be mediated by online technologies. It is also recognised that in some disciplines there are outcomes that can only be achieved through physical learning activities or which are best achieved through direct contact with student peers and teachers and consequently the ongoing use of residential schools is not ruled out by these commitments.
- The mix of synchronous and asynchronous activities in distance subjects will be determined based on the needs of the individual cohort. There is strong evidence that many students study at a distance because their lifestyles prevent them from attending classes at prescribed times and so in order to cater for these students synchronous sessions should not be made compulsory and asynchronous alternatives are needed for any synchronous learning activities. Nevertheless it is expected that there will be some synchronous activities available in all distance subjects. As a minimum it is expected that there would be one synchronous session at the beginning of the subject and one leading up to each assessment task.
- The question of whether to include repeat sessions to provide students with a choice of times for synchronous sessions is one that will need to be considered being mindful of the size of the cohort and the workload implications.
- In deciding on the length of online sessions and the formats for session recordings the Internet bandwidth of the students in the cohort should be considered (with the assistance of educational design/technology support staff).

- Reference to “designed” learning activities implies that purely responding in a reactive way to student postings in an online forum is not sufficient. Providing a discussion forum but not designing any learning activities that use it is arguably the online pedagogical equivalent of turning up to a tutorial without any preparation, standing up the front and saying “any questions?”. In subjects designed using the Smart Learning framework the design of learning activities will be articulated within the subject design in Smart Tools. For other subjects information about these learning activities should be contained within the subject outline.
- It is acknowledged that designing online learning activities is not a simple process and that faculty and learning and teaching services support will be needed to help academic staff identify and apply key principles from the long tradition of research in this area to their design work (see, for example, Laurillard, 2012; Lockyer, Bennett, Agostinho & Harper, 2008, Goodyear and Retalis, 2010; Conole, 2012).
- “Designed” learning activities which engage students with peers might include classic cooperative learning activities such as think-pair-share or jigsaw (which could be carried out synchronously or asynchronously) or could include group assignment tasks underpinned by cooperative learning principles such as positive interdependence and individual and group accountability (see, for example, Johnson, Johnson & Smith, 1998; Slavin, 1991; Kreijns, Kirschner & Jochems, 2003).
- It is acknowledged that a prerequisite for student engagement in online learning activities is the establishment of an online learning community and consequently there is an implied expectation that community building activities are provided to students early in the teaching session (see, for example, Salmon, 2003).
- The statements about “authentic” assessment and “alignment” between learning activities and assessment are consistent with underpinning ideas within the CSU Curriculum, Learning and Teaching Framework and are consistent with prevailing views within the wider research literature (see, for example, Biggs & Tang (2011); Gulikers, Bastiaens & Kirschner, 2004; Herrington & Oliver, 2000).
- Where a traditional lecture and tutorial subject design is used for on campus subjects, recorded “key sessions” would as a minimum include all lectures but may also include some tutorials. For distance subjects it is suggested that all synchronous sessions would be recorded, except for repeat sessions where there are multiple timeslots for a tutorial within a week.

- There has been no specification of actual technologies that might be used to achieve these commitments because of the importance of describing commitments in terms of student experiences, with the use of learning technologies seen as a means to an end rather than an end in itself. Clearly, though, the use of an online meeting tool, such as Adobe Connect for synchronous engagement, a lecture recording system such as CSU Replay (Echo 360) and an online discussion tool such as the CSU forum tool or an equivalent Blackboard tool for asynchronous engagement are likely to be essential in providing the above kinds of learning experiences. Innovators will of course see affordances in a much wider range of technologies including Web 2.0 social networking tools such as Wikis and Blogs, virtual worlds, interactive quiz platforms, ePortfolios etc etc.

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Appendix A. Principles within the Faculty of Education Flexible Learning Strategy approved by Faculty Board in 2010

Principle 1. The Faculty of Education should aim to reduce the delineation between face to face and distance education within a range of policy and administrative areas, including, for example, subject development processes and workload policies.

Principle 2. As part of ongoing course review processes, the Faculty of Education should consider the desirability of blended mode courses, and specifically the offering of single courses to distance and on campus students rather than separate courses in the two modes.

Principle 3. The Faculty of Education should encourage the regular and systematic evaluation of teaching in on-campus, distance and blended mode subjects, using a range of strategies in addition to formal student evaluation

Principle 4. The Faculty of Education should encourage academic staff as part of the overall learning design for their subjects to make explicit the purpose of online learning activities in order that staff and students can have shared expectations and conceptions of the learning situation.

Principle 5. The Faculty of Education should ensure that any decision to adopt new technologies for teaching and learning on the basis of assumptions about the learning preferences of new generations of students' should be based on sound research.

Principle 6. In encouraging increases in the use of technologies for teaching and learning the Faculty of Education should continually emphasise that technologies should only be adopted where there is a clear pedagogical rationale.

Principle 7. In designing online spaces for students it is important for the Faculty of Education to recognise that both synchronous and asynchronous communication mechanisms should be available since the relative advantages of each will depend on the learning outcomes, learning context and the learners' own learning situations.

Principle 8. As academic staff within the Faculty of Education begin to develop increasingly sophisticated online learning resources making use of a range of media, communities of practice need to be established to facilitate the sharing of expertise and knowledge of principles from instructional design and online communication research.

Principle 9. The Faculty of Education should as part of course review processes, explore the development of course portfolios which include mappings of types of learning resources, the extent and nature of student engagement, the range of facilitation strategies used, generic skill development and exemplars of innovative practice and which draw systematically on a range of course and subject evaluation data.

Principle 10. The Faculty of Education should ensure that course and subject design processes (leading to course profile, subject profile and subject outline documents) incorporate collaborative design teams and focus on learning design rather than teaching design.

Principle 11. The Faculty of Education should work with service providers such as Learning and Teaching Services, Library Services, and Student Services, with a focus on forward planning around defined projects or.

Principle 12. It is acknowledged that there are inherent costs involved in moves towards flexible and blended learning and that such moves need to be undertaken in a way that is sustainable within available workload and supporting resources.

Principle 13. The Faculty acknowledges the need for ongoing academic staff development as part of moves towards flexible and blended learning, including technological skills and both general and discipline specific knowledge of the pedagogies associated with the use of technologies for learning.