

Chapter 16

The Casual Academic in University Distance Education: From Isolation to Integration – A Prescription for Change

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ABSTRACT

Contextual changes in Australian universities such as the growth of the Internet, a new student population, and an emphasis on re-education and lifelong learning are manifest in a repositioning of distance education from the margins to the centre of concern. In addition, recent reform imperatives have future implications for distance education as it is considered integral to delivering on Australian Government policy in terms of increased socially inclusive engagements in university education. However, there is scant policy conversation about the experiences of academics who deliver distance education programs. In addition to this, the delivery of distance education is often undertaken by academics employed in a casual capacity. The experiences of the teaching workforce in distance education need to be explored and issues addressed if the future of distance education in higher education is to be a sustainable one for meeting the needs of university education in the new millennium.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter investigates the systematic, strategic use of casual academics employed in university distance education programs with particular reference to the provision of professional develop-

ment, institutional and faculty support. Through an analysis of published research literature and Government reports spanning the period 1998 to 2010, the following question is addressed: what strategies are required at institutional and faculty level to support the higher education workload in the provision of distance education, relating to current changes within the higher education internal and external environment?

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An analytical framework for addressing this question is developed through reviews of current research on university casual academics working in distance education modes. Initially, this will contextualise distance education and the ways in which it is positioned within the higher education sector, thereby highlighting contemporary Australian Government policy initiatives. The work experiences of the casual academic in distance education are then explored. Utilising this evidence, strategies for the use of casual academics in the delivery of distance education at both an institutional and faculty level are distilled and presented in the final section of the paper.

BACKGROUND

Before commencing the analysis, two key terms utilised throughout the paper are first clarified. Casual academics are understood to be university lecturers who are not entitled to either paid holiday leave or sick leave (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006). From the literature, the term 'distance education' is described as the processes of education undertaken when teacher(s) and students are separated by physical distance (Harting & Erthal, 2005; Moore & Kearsley, 1996). Communication between teachers and students is now mediated and facilitated by technologies both old (e.g. printed materials, CDs) and new (e.g. Web 2.0; learning management systems; videoconferencing) in blended and online learning environments.

DISTANCE EDUCATION AND HIGHER EDUCATION REFORM IN AUSTRALIA

Distance education has been slowly evolving since the 18th century, beginning with correspondence study and evolving into the 21st century electronic forms that deliver education

at a distance (Harting & Erthal, 2005). During this time, distance education was repositioned from an 'alternative' form of education for learners isolated from educational institutions to mainstream integration, due in part to the emergence of the Internet/Web, which has continued to change the way information is provided and the ways people interact with that information (Kearsley, 1998, p. 22). Technology and the growth of the Internet has been a key trend that has not only changed distance education but also changed the ways in which all universities now operate (Folkers, 2005; Yick, Patrick, & Costin, 2005; Wheeler, 2004). More than three quarters of all higher education providers now offer on-line courses and this is set to increase (Yick et al., 2005). Dual mode institutions, which teach both on-campus and distance students, are now the norm in Australia (Stacey & Visser, 2005).

The current main-streaming of distance education has also been, in part, driven by market forces over the last decade during which students demanded learning that is accessible and flexible. This new demand for convenience has been fuelled by adult learners requiring part-time learning; they represent the emergence of a new student population (Kearsley, 1998). Adult learners have a continued need for knowledge acquisition in order to keep skills up to date in a quest for greater job security, the result of which has been significant growth in the numbers of mature age students in universities. This trend also ensures adults have ongoing relationships with higher education as they seek lifelong learning throughout their careers (Folkers, 2005). As a result, a new type of university student has emerged: one that is older and typically studying part-time in order to incorporate full-time employment and/or families; the result being a demand for flexibility and convenience in their ongoing lifelong learning experiences (Folkers, 2005). Therefore, distance education's real force lies in its flexibility in meeting the needs of 21st century societies (Kearsley, 1998).

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