

# Chapter 1

## Native or Novice?

### An Exploratory Study of the Access to and Use of Digital Technologies among Pathway Students

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#### ABSTRACT

*Access to and use of technology by students deemed to be ‘Digital Natives’ studying in the Higher Education (HE) sector has been an area of much interest, speculation and publication. This chapter reports on a small-scale exploratory study that aimed to uncover the digital technology access and practices in both everyday life and academic study of ‘new’ international first-year ‘pathway’ students at the Eynesbury Institute of Business and Technology (EIBT). The purpose of this study was to contribute to the debate on digital natives by providing a ‘piece of evidence’ on the access to and use of digital technologies by a group of pre-university pathway students. This exploratory study stemmed from the realisation that EIBT lecturers could better meet the needs of the current generation and cohort of 20+ ethnically diverse students, and help them acculturate and transition as lifelong learners who are able to adapt to an evolving information landscape in Australian HE and upon their return home.*

#### INTRODUCTION

So-called ‘Digital Natives’ who have grown-up surrounded by technology are characterised by their dependence on technology to maintain social contact, their openness to share content, and their ability to adopt new technologies (Oblinger & Oblinger, 2005; Prensky, 2001). Increasingly

however, studies suggest that the homogeneity of this generation cannot be assumed and that in reality the technological characteristics of Digital Natives are significantly diverse in nature, especially in relation to their technology use as part of formal academic studies. Beetham and Sharpe (2007) for example, recognised the dangers in an ‘often uncritical attitude to Internet-based

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information, and the cut-and-paste mentality of a generation raised on editing tools rather than pen and paper' (p. 5). Similarly, Lea and Jones (2011) raised concerns about 'undergraduates being so immersed in Web-based technologies in their broader lives that they have difficulties engaging in more conventional study practices such as academic reading and writing essays' (p. 377). Variance in technological experience and ability, therefore, challenges many of the assumptions that form the basis of technological implementation strategies in the context of Higher Education (HE).

Herein, 'technology/technologies' will refer to artefacts and tools of the Web 2.0 era and beyond (Conole, de Laat, Dillon, & Darby, 2008, p. 511). The 'Information Age' is characterised by the diffusion of Information and Communications Technologies (ICTs) and an increased demand for educational approaches that foster 'lifelong learning' (Fischer & Konomi, 2007). The term 'international students' or 'students' is specific to individuals enrolled on temporary Australian student visas at EIBT and who are almost exclusively Non-English Speaking Background (NESB). This chapter uses the term 'Digital Natives' coined by Prensky (2001) and is directly linked to digital technologies of the 1990s with which this generation of students was raised. For the purpose of this chapter, there is scant literature on pre-university 'pathway' international students. Hence, this work contributes to bridging that gap as pathway institutions offer valuable partnerships for the HE sector and it is beneficial to conduct research into this division in order to strengthen the overall 'international student' experience.

## BACKGROUND

Founded in 1998, the Eynesbury Institute of Business and Technology (EIBT) in South Australia, offers pre-university pathways that attract students early in their education lifecycle and secure their

tertiary destination prior to them meeting university entrance requirements (Bode, 2013; Fiocco, 2006; Navitas, 2014; Velliari & Willis, 2014; Velliari, Willis, & Breen, 2015a). Specific to this research are the international students who enter EIBT to undertake a Diploma in: Business; Information Technology; or Engineering packaged with *The University of Adelaide* or the *University of South Australia*.

Though accessible to local students, student recruitment is predominantly directed towards full fee-paying international students who: (a) have completed Year 11 high school in Australia and would prefer to continue their studies in a different academic context; (b) have completed Year 12 high school in Australia, but did not obtain an ATAR [Australian Tertiary Admission Rank] sufficient for direct entry into university; (c) have graduated from high school abroad, but whose English language proficiency did not meet the minimum requirement for direct entry into university; or (d) are 20+ years of age with a relevant employment history (Velliari & Breen, 2014; Velliari & Coleman-George, 2014, 2015a, 2015b; Velliari & Willis, 2014; Velliari, Willis, & Breen, 2015b).

Approximately 40 'sessional' lecturers ranging in age from their 20s (i.e., PhD candidates and early career researchers) to their 60s (i.e., experienced academics and/or business professionals), deliver 40+ courses across three back-to-back trimesters). EIBT diplomas comprise the same—or deemed equivalent—eight courses that constitute the 'first-year' of a bachelor degree at the partner university. The partner university moderates diploma program delivery and grants advanced standing, equivalent to first-year, for courses if students achieve a specified entry-level Grade Point Average (GPA) upon graduation. With reference to Table 1, EIBT students are generally young, between 17-27 years, and throughout 2014 -2015 represented more than 20 different nationalities/ethnicities.

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