

Chapter 18

Equity of Experience: Shaping Pedagogy to Provide the Best Possible Learning Outcomes for All

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines some of the issues encountered by academics while developing online delivery of the Master of Information Management (MIM) program at RMIT University, Melbourne, Australia. RMIT is a multi-campus university of technology and design founded in the 1880s as a “working man’s college” and now operating in a global environment. This global context, along with the challenges confronting Australian higher education and professional training, means that considering the issues arising from the design, development, and delivery of non-traditional delivery modes, such as the online environment, is essential in the quest to provide sustainable quality education. The experience of the educators involved in developing the MIM program may assist others in creating similar programs and provide insights into issues associated with implementing best practice for online instruction.

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OVERVIEW OF POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION IN AUSTRALIA

Over the last twenty years, changing employment patterns and government pressure for increased educational participation rates have led to a growth in demand for education and training in Australia. Australian tertiary (post-secondary) education is conducted in two distinct sectors: Higher Education (HE) in both government-funded and some privately funded universities, and Vocational Education Training (VE or VET), delivered in state-funded Technical and Further Education colleges (TAFE), by accredited private providers, or solely in the workplace. In Australia, professional entry in numerous disciplines, including Library and Information Science, is achieved by completing an undergraduate degree, a post-graduate diploma¹ (Graduate Diploma) or a Master's degree. In many professions no distinction is drawn between the graduates of baccalaureate or post-baccalaureate programs.

Vocational training for trade and technical employment ranges from three-month Certificates² to two-and-a-half year Diplomas and Advanced Diplomas. Vocational education programs are distinct in their character and intent in comparison with their university counterparts, and deliver different employment outcomes. Such qualifications are seen to provide 'training' for industry rather than 'education' for professional work, and pedagogic distinctions are made between the delivery of VE qualifications and university education.

Since the 1980s, consecutive Australian governments have embraced educational participation as an economic necessity and sought to increase the number of students enrolled in higher education and vocational training. This policy has resulted in steady growth of those undertaking tertiary study over the last three decades. In 2009, the Federal Government once again announced a push to increase participation in education to ensure the number of graduates continues to meet Australia's future economic demands (Bradley,

2008; Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009). These recent attempts to increase tertiary educational participation have been closely tied to funding aimed at including students from marginalised socio-economic and equity groups. In 2009-10 the government allocated increased funding through the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPP) to promote participation rates of students from lower socio-economic status (SES) backgrounds (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2010). Particular focus was also on increasing participation of students in regional and remote areas who traditionally have lower rates of participation than their metropolitan counterparts. As part of these considerations it was noted that:

The difficulties in delivering higher education to a dispersed population in a continent the size of Australia are obvious. Overcoming barriers of distance is a key concern in the provision of higher education in Australia (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2010).

These concerns reflect how education in Australia has been influenced by the pressures of geography, or the 'tyranny of distance' as it has been called (Blainey, 1968; Harvey & Higgins, 2003). Australia is about the same size as the continental United States, yet has only 1/14th the population. The result is a small population spread over a vast area. Education has historically been localized and largely centralized in the capital cities of the five states and two territories. These geographic pressures have meant that many educational programs, catering largely to a local student body and a local employment market, have had low student numbers. Small programs delivered in such an environment are under constant pressure to increase their enrollment and inequities associated with limited access to education in traditional modes are a continuing concern.

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