

# **ENHANCING ONLINE LEARNING: PUBLIC LIBRARIES SUPPORTING STUDENT ENGAGEMENT AND SUCCESS**

## **ABSTRACT**

### **CONTENT STREAM: PUBLIC LIBRARIES**

#### **INTRODUCTION**

The development of an innovative program for online students in collaboration with public libraries began as a result of a chance conversation between a proactive librarian and a staff member from Open Universities Australia (OUA) about the needs of online students and the isolation that they often experience. From this an idea was born. Why not approach public libraries to see if they would be interested in offering library information sessions for OUA students in their local area? These sessions could encourage online students to meet together, get to know their local library, make use of its resources and gain that important face-to-face contact with professional library staff who understand the pressures of study.

#### **METHODS**

Between August 2012 and February 2013, a pilot program was run between OUA and four public libraries in regional areas of NSW. These libraries were promoted to OUA students (all studying online) as places where they could access high speed internet, modern computers, journal databases, inter-library loans, as well as encouragement and support from library staff. The feedback from students who attended was so positive that OUA decided to expand the program with the help of interested public libraries, creating the OUA Connect Library Program. With the support of the State Libraries of NSW and Victoria, and the Queensland Public Libraries Association (QPLA) the program has been promoted within these three states at national forums.

#### **RESULTS**

The pilot results demonstrated that the student cohort attending the libraries was highly satisfied, willing to recommend the program to others and wanting the program to continue. Primary reasons for attending were for academic purposes and for connection with other students, both for study support and social reasons. As a result of promotion and outreach to the library community, interest has grown considerably across five states, with more than 18 public libraries now part of the OUA Connect Library Program.

#### **CONCLUSIONS**

The OUA Connect Library Program brings together online students, public libraries and OUA in a collaborative relationship which enhances both the student experience and the role of public libraries within communities. OUA is keen to expand this program across as many public libraries as possible, to encourage the thousands of students who live and study remotely through OUA to make use of public library services and resources within their local

communities and, in doing so, to feel connected and supported with others who understand their needs.

## **RELEVANCE**

This paper is relevant to the session theme of Public Libraries Supporting Communities. The OUA Connect Program provides an example of a collaborative venture which promotes the role of the public library in the community. Through the promotion of public libraries as important spaces and places for students, the library can support and assist students to access relevant knowledge, to have a more positive student experience and to participate more actively within their own communities whilst studying.

# PAPER

## Introduction

The development of an innovative new program for online students began as a result of a chance conversation between Dr Cathy Stone, Head of Student Success with Open Universities Australia (OUA), and a proactive librarian, Daniel Kielly, from the NSW Council Region of Shellharbour. The initial conversation centred around the fact that OUA students in the Shellharbour region, located on the south coast of NSW, would often attend local libraries to seek resources or simply to find a quiet place to study. As Daniel Kielly explained, if the library staff knew more about Open Universities Australia and the expectations placed on online students, they would be in a much better position to assist them.

From this an idea was born. Why not approach local libraries to see if they would be interested in learning more about OUA, but more importantly, in offering library information sessions for online students? These sessions could provide the opportunity for students, studying online and largely on their own, to come together, get to know their local library, make use of the resources on offer and gain that important face-to-face contact with others who understand their study needs.

The next step was to approach libraries and establish a pilot program. Daniel Kielly was willing to help coordinate a pilot program at Shellharbour to the south of Sydney, while the newly appointed Partnership Officer for Lifelong Learning at Wyong Council, Debbie Notara, was willing to coordinate the pilot across another two libraries in the Wyong Shire, to the north of Sydney.

Between August 2012 and February 2013, a pilot program was run between OUA and these four public libraries in regional areas of NSW. These libraries were promoted to OUA students (all studying online) as places where they could access high speed internet, modern computers, journal databases, inter-library loans, as well as encouragement and support from library staff.

The feedback from students who attended was so positive that OUA decided to expand the program with the help of interested public libraries, creating the OUA Connect Library Program. With the support of the State Libraries of NSW and Victoria, and the Queensland Public Libraries Association (QPLA) the program has been promoted within these three states at national forums. Since then, interest has grown considerably amongst the public library community, not only in NSW, Victoria and Queensland, but also in Tasmania, South Australia and Western Australia. By August 2014, OUA Connect had extended its partnerships to 25 council libraries across 4 states and territories in Australia (NSW, ACT, VIC and QLD) and is now exploring interest in the other states.

## Need for the Program

Enhancing academic success is a goal that all of us involved in education strive to meet. Each of the authors of this paper has had close contact over many years with students in different settings, from many diverse backgrounds and of all ages. It is through this close contact that we have been constantly reminded of the importance of students feeling a sense of belonging and connection with a learning community. Hand in hand with this goes the need for appropriately targeted and effective support – both academic and personal, to

ensure that every student has the opportunity to reach their potential (Stone, 2000, 2004; Krause, 2005b; Tinto, 2009). How we can achieve this effectively in an online environment is a new challenge for many, as universities and other tertiary institutions move increasingly to online delivery.

### **Open Universities Australia**

Open Universities Australia (OUA), which began as 'Open Learning' in Australia in 1993, is now the national leader in online higher education, with over 250,000 students having studied with it since it started operating. It is a company that is owned by seven Australian Universities, providing over 1800 units of study, and more than 180 qualifications from 13 Australian Universities.

OUA offers courses and units delivered online by its educational partners and affiliates. These include enabling and bridging courses, undergraduate degrees and postgraduate qualifications. Qualifications are awarded by the particular university which has provided the course of study, and these qualifications are identical to those awarded to on-campus students.

Online delivery removes many of the traditional barriers to higher education. Entry to nearly all units of study is open to all, requiring no pre-requisite qualifications. Students can choose to study a range of individual units, which may be based purely on interest, or can select those which will enable them to work towards a full degree program. Entry to a degree program can be achieved via the credit gained from units successfully completed. Some students also use OUA studies as a way to fast-track their qualifications. With four OUA study periods each year, students can gain extra credit by taking OUA units during the normal university vacation period.

OUA students can also apply for Fee Help, the Commonwealth scheme which allows deferred payment of fees in the same way as HECS (Higher Education Contribution Scheme), so that no money has to be paid up-front. Over 70% of OUA students use Fee Help to fund their studies. They can choose from a wide range of units and courses, including Arts & Humanities, Business, Education, Health, Information Technology, Law & Justice studies, Science & Engineering.

### **Who are OUA students?**

OUA students come from all walks of life, including school leavers, mature workers, full-time parents and those who are unemployed. Approximately 60% of OUA students are female and the majority is aged over 21 – therefore 'mature-age' by definition. The majority of students come from NSW, Victoria and Queensland, but every other state and territory is represented as well. Nearly 78% of students live in major Australian cities with most speaking English as their first language. Over 80% nominate professional development as their primary motive for studying. Nearly 70% are employed full time or part time, while around one in ten are in full-time home duties and a similar number is seeking work. Just under half come from families where neither parent has a university qualification and around a quarter are from the lower five deciles for socio-economic status as determined by postcode. Similar to the statistics in the higher education sector in general, around 5% of students identify as having a disability.

The statistics above indicate that OUA students can generally be considered 'non-traditional'. Few come straight from school, the majority is mature-aged, a quarter come from the lower five SES deciles, around 40% are the first in their family to come to university, and they are all able to enter university studies through an open-entry environment. As such, OUA provides an important pathway into higher education for identified equity groups.

### **Importance of student engagement**

So we know that OUA is an important entry point into higher education for many students from diverse backgrounds, and what we also know from other research is that the real challenge is effectively engaging and supporting such students so that they are more likely to stay and succeed. Definitions of student engagement vary slightly, but there is general agreement that it requires the investment and commitment of both the student and the institution, and that there are strategies which institutions can use to enhance engagement.

According to Krause and Coates (2008):

student engagement develops from the dynamic interplay between student and institutional activities and conditions” (p.494).

Vicki Trowler, in her review of the literature on student engagement on behalf of the UK Higher Education Academy, summarises the character of student engagement in the following way:

Student engagement is concerned with the interaction between the time, effort and other relevant resources invested by both students and their institutions intended to optimise the student experience and enhance the learning outcomes and development of students and the performance, and reputation of the institution. (Trowler, 2010, p.3).

Data from the AUSSE (Australasian Survey of Student Engagement; ACER, 2008a, 2009, 2010) informs us that amongst students in Australia and New Zealand, engagement with the learning community is closely linked with student satisfaction and success. This is consistent with the findings from the NSSE – the National Survey of Student Engagement that began in the US – as well as an international body of research, such as that by Kuh and colleagues who find that “Student engagement in educationally purposeful activities is positively related to academic outcomes” (Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie and Gonyea, 2008. p.555).

### **Value of support mechanisms**

Tinto's work in the area of student retention over many years also points to the impact of support on positive academic outcomes. Support is a condition that promotes student retention. Research points to several types of support that promote retention, in particular academic and social support. (Tinto, 2009). Forging positive connections with teaching staff and fellow students has also been demonstrated internationally to play a significant role in student satisfaction, persistence and academic success (Coffman & Gilligan, 2002; Quinn, 2005; Skahill, 2002/2003).

According to Skahill (2002/2003) “the most important criterion for staying in college is the student’s social support network” (p. 39), while Rendon’s (1998) work with mature-age and other non-traditional students in American colleges indicates the importance of “validation, when faculty, students, friends, parents and spouses made an effort to acknowledge these students and what they were trying to achieve” (p. 3). Kuh et al. (2008) find that there is a “compensatory effect” (p.555) of student engagement for students who are “academically unprepared or first in their families to go to college” (p.555), in that such students, when engaged, perform better academically than expected, in comparison to more advantaged students, as well as demonstrating persistence through improved retention.

### **Mature-age student experience**

Research with Australian mature-age students (Stone and O’Shea, 2012) who are the first in their families to come to university (and who, as we have seen, form a significant cohort within OUA) demonstrates that establishing positive connections with others, such as lecturers, friends and fellow students, library staff, and others on campus, including those working in the cafeteria and the bookshops, played a major role in their determination to persist with their studies, despite the many pressures of time, money and family issues. Another important factor is the presence and use of free, well-resourced and easily accessible support services. “Easy and free access to [support] services is clearly of high importance in terms of supporting students to stay and succeed” (Stone & O’Shea, 2012, p.95).

### **Engaging through local libraries**

While OUA provides a range of support services to students, including academic preparation courses, student coaching, counselling, tutorial support and financial assistance through scholarships and subsidies, the missing element in the support offered has been that of face-to-face interaction, particularly with other students.

We know that student interactions are highly important in student learning (ACER, 2008), particularly for non-traditional students. Initiatives connecting students with each other, such as student mentor programs, are recognised nationally and internationally as contributing significantly to student satisfaction and retention (Dearlove, Farrell, Handa, & Pastore, 2007; Erskine, 2000; Krause, 2005b; McInnes, James & Hartley, 2000; Stone, 2000). Through the assistance of local libraries, face-to-face student interactions in venues which are supportive of education became possible.

The student cohorts attending the libraries continue to be highly satisfied with the program, willing to recommend the program to others and wanting the program to continue. Reasons for attending are usually for academic purposes and for connection with other students, both for study support and social reasons. The following quotes are examples of student feedback:

*Great having face-to-face contact and talking with other students about their experiences.*

*I have found this helpful and encouraging especially the library staff and other students helps to keep you focussed, and aware there are other online students experiencing the same issues or have found ways to overcome these issues. Love the communication.*

This valuable program has provided an opportunity for OUA to work collaboratively with local libraries to provide a community space in which online students can interact and study with support from library staff. It has the potential to improve academic success for online students, as well as enhancing student satisfaction, particularly amongst those from rural and remote regions of Australia.

Libraries interested in hosting sessions for online students can decide exactly what they are would like to offer – ranging from a one-off library information session, to weekly drop-in sessions for online students with a dedicated member of the library staff in attendance, to anything in between. OUA runs an information session with library staff, to equip them with knowledge about OUA and its students, the patterns of study expected and the support service available.

Many libraries already run sessions for their local communities which are of benefit to online students, including computer and essay writing classes. OUA is happy to promote any such sessions to its students, in the relevant postcode areas for each library. Promotion is primarily by email and via the OUA website, but there are also regular social media posts through OUA's social media channel. The program attracts great interest from students on Facebook. In fact, the very first OUA Connect status post was the most popular amongst OUA's Facebook community, with more than 124,000 individual views. Comments posted indicate that this is a very popular concept, with students commenting on which local libraries they would like to see participating in the OUA Connect Library Program.

## **CONCLUSION**

Partnerships between educational services and local libraries are of benefit to all – to the libraries, to the educational institutions and, most of all, to the students. The OUA Connect Library Program brings together online students, public libraries and OUA in a collaborative relationship which enhances both the student experience and the role of public libraries within communities. OUA is keen to expand this program across as many public libraries as possible, to encourage the thousands of students who live and study remotely through OUA to make use of public library services and resources within their local communities and, in doing so, to feel connected and supported with others who understand their needs.

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