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Universities need to train lecturers in online delivery, or they risk students dropping out

March 25, 2020 9.22am AEDT

Most Australian universities are moving courses online to prevent the potential spread of COVID-19. This includes lectures and tutorials, which will likely be delivered via the university learning management systems such as Moodle or Blackboard.

Some students believe universities are waiting until the census date (the date students can withdraw from the course without incurring a fee) before the transition, so they are locked into an inferior online experience while paying money for what they believe is a superior mode of teaching.

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scott hansen @waynesmith12199 · Mar 20, 2020

Replying to @unimelb

yo just so everyone knows, melbourne uni is refusing to shut until the census date passes so they can lock in everyone's \$\$\$ when they should have closed coz of this if not earlier. pretty abhorrent



University of Melbourne

@unimelb

We're progressively moving face-to-face tutorials and other forms of small class teaching to online delivery. More information

here: students.unimelb.edu.au/student-suppor...

Updates and advice for students

Updates and advice for all students during the current outbreak of coronavirus COVID-19.

students.unimelb.edu.au

10:54 AM - Mar 20, 2020

[See University of Melbourne's other Tweets](#)

When done right, **online learning** can actually be as effective as face-to-face education. But Australian universities haven't upskilled their staff to deliver this kind of quality online education.

If Australian universities don't provide intensive upskilling to lecturers to deliver online classes and support effectively, they might see many students disengaging and dropping out early.

Why online learning can fail

Australian universities introduced online degrees more than a decade ago. The hope was, and still is, that online learning would provide access for students who have historically been prevented from completing a higher education because they were unable to attend university in person.

These include students from low socio-economic backgrounds, students with a disability, and regional and remote students.

Completion rates for students studying fully online in many countries are considerably lower than for those studying face-to-face. In Australia, dropout is at least 20% higher for online students compared with on-campus students and degree completions are 2.5 times lower.

Those most likely to drop out are the very groups access to online learning was meant to reach.

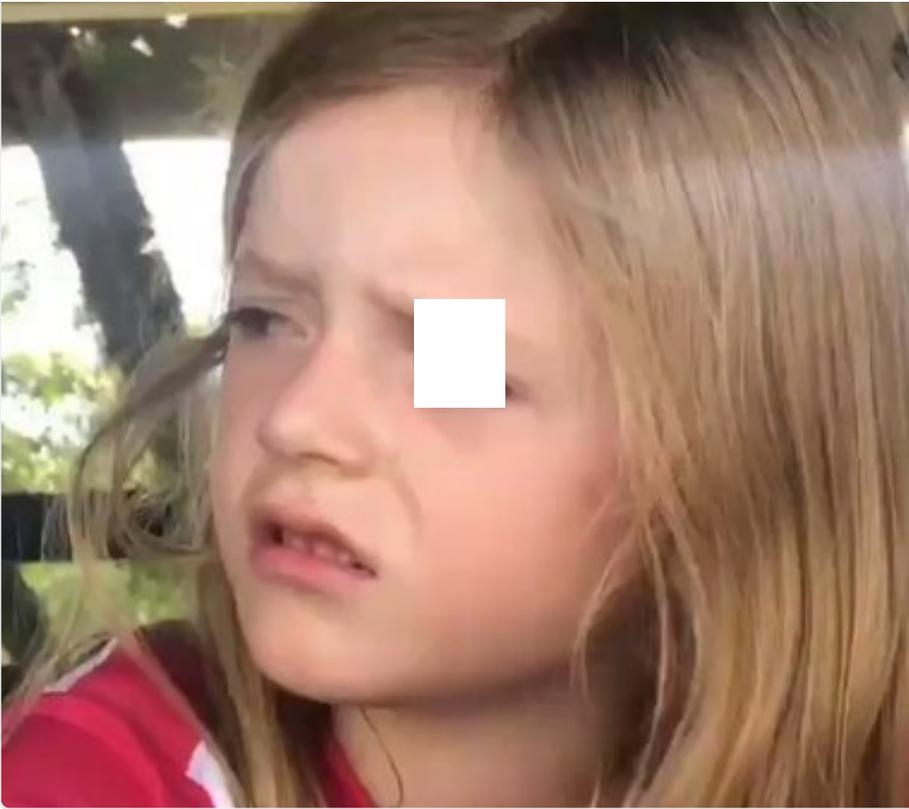
A national 2017 study investigated these dropout rates. It found many academic and professional staff at Australian universities perceived online delivery as less important or lower priority than face to face.



perla 🌹
@perla_karina22

me when my university sent me an email saying we were gonna continue classes online for the rest of the semester instead of just giving us all A's twitter.com/vitorvenancio_...

- ,` vitor venâncio ,´ - @vitorvenancio_
bomboclaat



3,476 11:54 AM - Mar 19, 2020

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The same report also identified a lack of skill and experience among many academic staff when it came to online course design and online teaching which, in turn, impacted negatively on student learning and engagement.

A 2016 study showed a lot of online learning in Australian universities consisted of lecturers simply uploading materials they used in their face-to-face courses to online learning platforms.

Many university teachers have had no experience themselves of online learning and have not been upskilled in online course design and pedagogy.

Read more: Australian unis may need to cut staff and research if government extends coronavirus travel ban

Where online students are out of sight and out of mind and lecturers do not have the skills to teach in an online environment it's the perfect storm for disengagement and dropout.

When online learning is done right

Learning management systems such as Moodle are designed to support online learning. These systems effectively organise learning resources, including multimedia resources, that students can easily access.

Students can engage in collaborative activities with their peers and lecturers, through tools such as discussion boards and wikis (a website or database developed collaboratively by a community of users, allowing any user to add and edit content).

An analysis of studies conducted between 1995 and 2004 compared achievement for students who had completed online and face-to-face tertiary education courses. It found the results were largely similar.

Read more: The coronavirus outbreak is the biggest crisis ever to hit international education

Students who completed online courses learnt as much as those in face-to-face instruction, achieved as well and were equally satisfied with their overall experience. The key word here is completion. There are higher dropout rates and lower completions across the higher education sector internationally for students who study online.

When online learning is well-designed, conducted in a learning management system and is in the hands of skilled teachers, it offers a comparable learning experience to face-to-face.

What many uni courses may look like online

In the current scenario, a lecturer may deliver the same lecture or tutorial via video that they would deliver face to face. They may use online discussion boards or chat rooms to try and replicate small group work in tutorials.

Students may work through course materials on their own and have little connection with each other or their lecturer beyond the real-time video or chat interactions. They may not get the opportunity for the kinds of peer-to-peer and student-lecturer interaction that support engagement and learning.

Research shows these sorts of practices – which can be more accurately described as “remote learning” rather than “online learning” - promote student disengagement and dropout.



Mark Warschauer @markwarschauer · Mar 13, 2020

Many colleges are moving to "remote learning" rather than calling it "online learning." Here is the difference.



Mark Warschauer
@markwarschauer

Online learning typically provides "anytime, anywhere" access to course materials. It is great for people who are working, taking care of families, etc., who need to study on their own schedules.

12:26 AM - Mar 13, 2020

[See Mark Warschauer's other Tweets](#)

So, what can lecturers do to improve learning?

In the immediate future, university staff moving to online teaching can use some of the following tips to help students stay satisfied and engaged.

1. Communicate with students as much as possible

- get to know your students in the online environment. Ask them to introduce themselves by completing an “about you” page
- students are likely to have many questions. One way to manage this is to set up a Frequently Asked Questions discussion board and ask students to post their question on it. In that way, all students can see the response
- set up a weekly 30 minute live, but also recorded, Q & A session. Students can send in questions for you to respond to or ask you live. This way, students will see you “in person”.

2. Make sure students know where to get support

- make clear to students where they can access support for the different areas that impact them, such as academic advice and finance. You will need to work closely with student support services to do this
- set up a student support services discussion board in your subject, which student support officers could manage.

3. Help build your students’ technology skills

- help students who aren’t so sure about the online platform to learn the technological skills they need. It’s not just you who needs upskilling.
- you can ask your student group to self-nominate as online mentors if they have good online skills. It’s a great way to build connections.

1. Get across the resources

- your students will need to collaborate and share knowledge in new ways now they are not in the same physical space. Use discussion boards and wikis to encourage them to work on collaborative activities. If you don’t know how to do this, ask your learning and teaching specialists at your university. Edinburgh University also has some [helpful resources](#). Stephen Downes’ [creating an online community guide](#) is also helpful
- for course design ideas, Professor Gilly Salmon’s [carpe diem resources](#) are excellent.

Universities should also move, as quickly as they can, to provide intensive training in online course delivery to their lecturers.