



Quest for Student Success: A Cross-disciplinary Exploration of the Learning and Development Needs of Online Students in a Regional University

Key Words

Online learning; student success; student learning and development;

Abstract

There has been an increasing emphasis on the importance of the online environment across many higher education institutions. This means that developing appropriate and relevant learning assisted programs to engage online students is critical in enhancing student success. This paper reports on a Student Learning and Development Unit's initiative in exploring the interplay between university environments, students' experience and student success outcomes. As a presage to examining these relationships, the task of identifying the academic language and learning needs of online students is necessary. The focus of this paper is to report the preliminary findings of this mixed-method research project that seeks to identify across disciplines the language and learning development needs of online students at a regional university. Previous studies demonstrate that there are many factors affecting student online learning. For example, emotions, such as enjoyment, interest, boredom and frustration are shown to impact students' online engagement (Kahu, Stephens, Leach & Zepke, 2015). Other important factors indicated in the research include feelings of connectedness with instructors and peers (Delahunty, Verenikina & Jones, 2014) and the relationship between peer-to-peer interaction and online student retention (Boyle, Kwon, Ross & Simpson, 2010). Additionally, studies have demonstrated that the opportunity for interaction in learning activities (Kuo, Walker, Schroder & Belland, 2014) and the positive effects of interaction in online courses (Croxtton, 2014; Barberà, Layne & Gunawardena, 2014) are significant. These studies have been influential in informing the findings discussed in this paper but their focus is mainly curriculum based rather than co-curricular initiatives. Several co-curricular online resources aimed at developing academic skills have been evaluated and reported on in recent years (Mort, 2012; Nallaya & Kehrwald, 2013). These studies are instructive in communicating good practice in the field and providing an insight into their development. There are several areas, however, that these studies do not address. For example, there is limited investigation of students' learning and development needs or means of addressing emotional engagement in the context of these particular institutions. Although each of the programs is thoroughly informed by evidence and current research, the needs of the student cohort have not been reported on in the development stages. Further, student-instructor interaction tends to have been neglected in favour of student-content interaction. This paper begins to address these issues by reporting on the findings of a project that investigated the learning and development needs of online students from a co-curricular perspective. It will also take into account significant online learning factors, such as emotional engagement and different types of student interaction. The paper will also discuss the ways in which these findings inform the development of online resources and effective engagement of online students within the context of learning support at the institution at the centre of this study.

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