Digital disruption meets the academic timetable: start learning anytime

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Many universities claim to provide flexible learning opportunities, but most still require students to keep pace with prescribed curriculum delivery and assessment deadlines, and few have disrupted the academic calendar. In this paper, we report on an innovation called 'Start anytime' that was purposefully designed to break from a trimester model and instead give students the flexibility to study in their own space and pace online. Here we report on measures put in place to support students during self-paced online study, and share insights from research investigating students' expectations and experience of 'Start anytime'. For many students, the self-management required for self-paced study was a challenge, but for most students those challenges were out weighted by the benefits of flexible learning. Importantly, the majority of students thought that access to learning support and teaching staff was the same or better in 'Start anytime' units than in a timetabled unit, and many students found that self-paced study was easier and more enjoyable. Thus, we have shown that where it is carefully designed and supported, self-paced online learning and disruption of the academic calendar, can have considerable benefits for experienced adult learners who have difficulty fitting study around their busy lives.

Keywords: asynchronous study, self-paced online learning, student experience, flexible delivery.

Introduction

The ways in which university students engage with online and on-campus learning opportunities has changed as digital tools have become more advanced, affordable and accessible. Use of learning management systems and other online technologies to compliment face-to-face teaching is now standard practice in Australian universities and has changed the nature of both distance and on-campus learning. Students are opting to study online more and on-campus less: including both the proportion of students who choose to study entirely online, and the changing habits of those who enrol on a physical campus (Norton, Sonnemann, & McGannon, 2013; Stone, 2017).

These trends are not surprising given that today's students spend more time in paid work than their predecessors and are more likely to be balancing study with other commitments that include work, parental responsibilities and other carer roles (Gosper et al., 2010; Stone, 2017). For some students, online learning is also important to overcoming geographical constraints, commuting difficulties or other impairments that impede their access to physical campus spaces (Stone, 2017). Thus, contemporary students value and often require the flexibility afforded by studying partially or entirely online (George-Walker & Keeffe, 2010; Norton & Cakitaki, 2016; Sheppard & Smith, 2016).

Universities are increasingly making claims about providing flexible learning opportunities. However, the ways in which flexibility is offered are still very limited. Students are given opportunities to learn in different modes (e.g. online, on-campus or combinations of the two), but few universities have disrupted the academic calendar. Therefore, studying online provides students with greater flexibility over where they study, but contact hours and when students study is still largely prescribed by semester or trimester and weekly calendars. Some universities provide more frequent intake opportunities in a year, but when those study periods start and end is standardised, so students must keep up with the pace of curriculum delivery and meet imposed assessment deadlines.

Accountability to deadlines can help to keep students on track and allows teaching staff to manage their workload. However, studying at prescribed times and meeting deadlines can be challenging or even prohibitive for adult learners who are unable to prioritise study over other commitments and who cannot predict or control the demands of other aspects of their lives (Stone, 2017). For this reason, retention is lowest for mature-age and part-time students who are more often juggling other commitments and only studying part-time because they are constrained by other responsibilities (Higher Education Standards Panel, 2017; Norton et al., 2013)

In a nutshell, the relentless pressure of "week by week" learning progress can lead to student withdrawal. However, it does not need to be that way. Just as digital streaming had disrupted consumer viewing patterns, digital technologies have the capacity to disrupt prescribed patterns of learning. At its inception, free to air television broadcasting operated on a similar model: consumer entertainment patterns were prescribed by timetabled weekly instalments of programs that best suited the station and their advertisers. Video recorders later enabled viewers to have more control over when they viewed content, and provided the first opportunities for "binge watching". Now, internet streaming services enable consumers to watch what they want, when they want and on the device of their choosing. Likewise, digital education has the capacity to let the learner choose not just how they access learning, but also when, where and how quickly.

In this paper, we report on a Deakin innovation called 'Start Anytime' that was designed to disrupt the academic calendar. Having agreed to a strategy to enable "brilliant education where students are and where they want to go", we challenged ourselves to imagine how we might use digital tools to allow the learner to start, advance and complete their studies at the pace that suited them, not us. This meant allowing students to enrol in a unit on the day of their choosing, to move through the learning experiences at their own pace, and to submit their assignments when they felt ready.

Called 'Start Anytime', the pilot was designed to maximise flexibility by unleashing select units of study from trimester and weekly calendars. This created significant administrative challenges: in addition to redesigning learning experiences and assessments, we needed to address how this disruption would affect the academic workload model, the role of the teaching staff, enrolment systems, deadlines, fees, census dates, withdrawal procedures, boards of examiners, and student evaluation of the learning experience – to name a few. However, the scope of this paper is not to consider all of these challenges, but to report on the student response to the innovation. First, we briefly describe the measures put in place to ensure that Start Anytime' students were as well supported as those who chose to participate in trimester mode, we then share insights from research investigating students' expectations and experience of Start Anytime.

'Start anytime' pilot: context and support

We identified two existing postgraduate business units that could be redesigned to facilitate self-paced learning: Business Process Management (MPM701A) and Analytical Skills for Managers (MIS770A). Both units were already offered entirely online as well as on-campus. Both units continued to operate in the normal trimester mode, and we agreed that students who opted to enrol in 'Start anytime' – for whatever reason – could transfer seamlessly into the trimester mode if they wished. We agreed that 'Starting anytime' meant that students could enrol any day that the university was open for business (excluding university and public holidays); had to remain in the unit for a minimum of four weeks; and had to complete that unit within a year of completion. The Start Anytime pilot commenced in January 2016.

In recognition of the risk of isolation during asynchronous online study, measures were put in place to ensure that 'Start anytime' students were supported by their teachers and had opportunities to interact with their peers. These measures included the articulation of 'guarantees' so as to set clear expectations for a responsive relationship between students and their teachers. Those guarantees include a commitment to respond to student enquiries within 48 hours, and assessment of formative assignments within 5 days of submission. Students were also provided with multiple points of contact, including the unit chair's email address and telephone number and opportunities to meet with the unit chair (through Skype, phone or face-to-face) as required.

Discussion forums were also provided through the learning management system so that students could engage in asynchronous conversations with their peers and teachers. Non-compulsory online group meeting opportunities were also scheduled by teachers and facilitated using BlackBoard Collaborate. Given the asynchronous nature of the units, no specific content or activities were prepared for these meetings; rather, they were 'drop in' opportunities for students to get help or share experiences with other students and their teachers. Meetings were initially scheduled for two hours once a week. However, in response to low attendance (four students or less) in the first month of the trial, these were exchanged for four 30-minute sessions staggered throughout the week to increase the flexibility of engagement opportunities. However, student attendance dropped to zero, so meeting opportunities were dropped after a two-month trial.

To encourage student engagement, login reminders were initially sent to students who had not logged into the unit sites every two weeks. However, these were adjusted to once a month as teaching staff realised that students were reaching out when they wanted or needed help.

The units chosen for the pilot were pre-existing units selected for their suitability for self-paced study in that they were already designed so that students could follow detailed prompts and sequences appearing throughout the respective units' comprehensive modules of learning. However, various adjustments were made in each unit to improve clarity and avoid student misunderstanding. These changes included removal of references to weekly schedules, due dates and timeframes. An introduction to the importance of self-management to accomplishing the learning objectives and assessments was also included in the online study guide. Other changes varied by unit. For example, one unit chair pre-recorded seminars to introduce the unit and each of ten learning modules. These spanned 30 - 60 minutes and covered all of the content that would ordinarily be covered in a two-hour interactive session on-campus or a 90 min interactive session online. Students could stream these from the learning management system or download them for later listening. All resources were provided at enrolment, so that students did not need to wait for week-by-week instalments.

Assessments were also redesigned to remove group work and live assessments (such as examinations and presentations) and to mitigate the risk of plagiarism. For example, in one unit an assessment creation system was developed to automate the production of unique detailed assessment briefs that included comprehensive hypothetical, organisational scenarios and arrays of data, randomly computed from within predefined ranges.

Research methodology

All students who enrolled in the 'Start Anytime' units were initially invited to complete two surveys, one at enrolment and a second at completion. The enrolment survey was designed to investigate students' motivations and expectations of self-paced online study. The completion survey included the universities standard student evaluation question set, as well as questions specifically targeted at understanding students' experience of the 'Start anytime' mode of study. Both surveys were sent out every two weeks to any students who had newly enrolled in or completed either of the units. To ensure that enrolment and completion survey invitations were received by all students who enrolled in the first year of the pilot the enrolment survey was sent out for approximately one year and completion survey for two years. Sixty nine students (30% response rate) responded to the enrolment survey and thirty seven students (29% response rate) responded to the completion survey. For this paper we have provided an analysis of a reduced data set from those surveys, including students' responses to the following questions:

Enrolment survey

1. Why did you choose to enrol in this unit in 'Start Anytime' mode instead of a timetabled trimester of study? (open-ended question, followed by four-point agreement scales against related statements)

2. Do you think studying in 'Start Anytime' mode will be associated with any challenges? (open ended question)

Completion survey

1. How does studying in a 'Start Anytime' unit compare to studying in a timetabled unit? Students were asked to make a choice between: 'greater in a 'Start Anytime' unit', 'greater in a timetabled unit' or 'no difference', for the following:
   - Convenience;
   - Difficulty;
   - Depth of learning;
   - Enjoyment of learning;
   - Access to learning support/teaching staff; and
   - Ease of communication with peers.

2. What benefits were associated with completing this unit in 'Start Anytime' mode? (open-ended question)

3. What challenges were associated with completing this unit in 'Start Anytime' mode? (open-ended question)

4. Would you recommend 'Start Anytime' mode to other students? Why or why not (Yes or no, with an open-ended comment)

Student expectations at enrolment

The majority of students who responded to the enrolment survey, said that they chose to study in a 'Start Anytime' unit because they wanted or needed flexibility to accommodate other commitments. These included work, family, travel and other study that was associated with less flexibility (i.e. other units with "extremely strict deadlines"). Students were often juggling multiple demands on their time, for example:

> "I find it very difficult to manage work, family and study commitments. My time to study is limited and I need to do as much as possible when I have the opportunity. Having resources released all at once and flexible due dates will allow me to fit in study when I can, allowing for unexpected things such as child illness, intensive projects at work, etc. I have previously had to withdraw form units in the course I have just discontinued, as there is very little room in my schedule for things to go wrong, as they inevitably do."

Some students indicated that they had selected the mode of study because it had allowed them to continue studying despite a significant disruption that would have prevented them from enrolling in a timetabled unit, or because it had given them the confidence to enrol in more units despite other commitments. Essentially, students saw the longer duration and flexible deadlines as a "safety net". Other students had enrolled in the unit of study so that they could take the time to learn more deeply, to accommodate learning difficulties or to accommodate other commitments.

Some students had enrolled in the 'Start Anytime' mode because they wanted to accelerate their study. However, few students intended to accelerate the completion of the unit itself. More commonly, students wanted to accelerate the completion of their degree program, by starting the unit earlier, utilising free time during trimester breaks, or by taking on a greater study commitment (more units at a time). For some students, this desire to accelerate the completion of their degree was out of necessity, for example, one student said:

> "I would also like to finish my course asap as I am undertaking this degree to reskill after redundancy in the mining sector and having difficulties in gaining employment in my original profession".

Other students enrolled in the 'Start anytime' version of the unit so that they could complete the unit in time to meet a prerequisite requirement for the following trimester, or to reduce their workload in a following trimester. Students were also attracted to the mode of study because of the absence of an exam and group work, which were in themselves associated with greater flexibility, for example:

> "More flexibility, no exams and no group work makes the unit easier to manage for a student working full-time especially over the summer months".

Most students anticipated that managing their own time would be a challenge, in particular staying motivated and organised without deadlines and managing unexpected changes to work or personal life that might prolong the time required to complete the unit. Some students also recognised the potential for isolation and expected that there would be less opportunities for student-student learning and collaboration on assignments. Some students thought that understanding the requirements might be challenging and emphasised the importance of clarity in the learning resources. Students also suggested that communication with teachers might be a challenge because students would be at different stages of completion. For the same reason, other students suggested that the study mode would likely be associated with challenges for the teacher but not students themselves.

Student expectations after completion

The majority (92%) of students who responded to the survey after having completed a 'Start anytime' unit indicated that they would recommend 'Start Anytime' mode to other students. As expected, flexibility was the main benefit described by students, both in their reasons for recommending the mode of study to other students and in their responses to other open-ended questions. In addition to helping them to gain "study-work-life balance" and reduce the stress associated with study, some students felt that flexibility had enabled them to learn more deeply, for example:

> "Being able to access all materials from the start was excellent. Having plenty of time to engage with learning materials led to deeper learning. The flexible approach enabled me to fit study in with my work and family, and allow for unexpected problems. I felt more in control and way less

stressed. I have previously had to discontinue units due to sudden family issues as I have a disabled child, and this was just so much better"

"Juggling work and other study commitments with this course was easier because of the informal time constraints. That actually encouraged me to understand the course content when I got my head into it..."

Students had mixed perceptions of how studying in a 'Start Anytime' unit compared to studying in a timetabled unit (Figure 1). However, the vast majority of students (97%) agreed that studying in a 'Start Anytime' unit was more convenient than studying in a timetabled unit (Figure 1). The majority of students either preferred 'Start anytime' (39%) or thought there was no difference (33%) in their enjoyment of learning in a 'Start anytime' unit in comparison to a timetabled unit. More students did think that it was easier to communicate with their peers in a timetabled unit than in a 'Start Anytime' unit; however, 39% indicated no difference and only 3% indicated that this was lesser in a 'Start Anytime' unit. Furthermore, the most students indicated no difference between depth of learning (64%), access to learning support or teaching staff (58%), and difficulty (42%) between "Start Anytime' and timetable units, but other students had mixed perceptions about whether 'Start Anytime' or timetabled units were better (Figure 1).
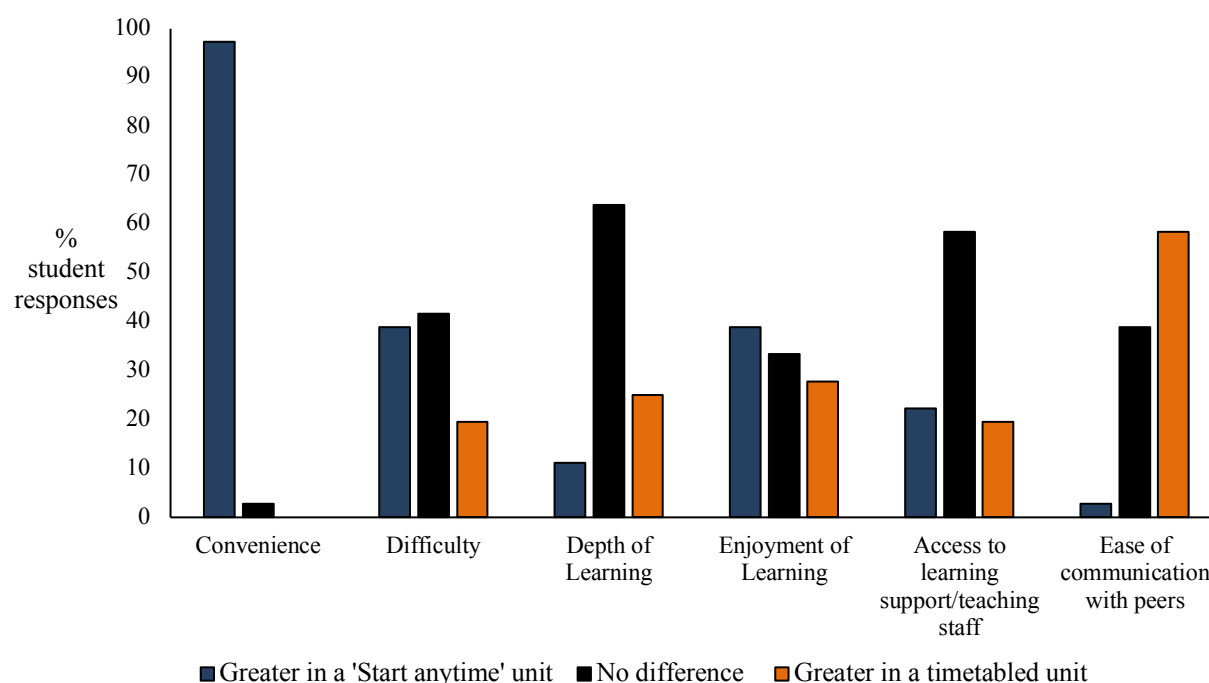

Figure 1. Students' comparison of the convenience, difficulty, depth of learning, enjoyment of learning, access to learning support and teaching staff, and ease of communication with peers in a 'Start anytime' unit vs. a timetabled unit.

The challenge most commonly reported by students was self-management, including: setting deadlines, remaining motivated, avoiding procrastination, and greater difficulty learning where they had delayed completing an assessment:

"As there was (sic) no fixed deadlines I continuously left the work and came back to it, which was more difficult than if I had completed (sic) in one go".

However, students who highlighted self-management as a challenge often tempered that viewpoint by acknowledging that self-management was their responsibility, a challenge that they had expected or a challenge that they were capable of overcoming. Some students actually suggested that improved self- or time-management were a benefit of completing the unit in 'Start Anytime' mode.

Only three students (8% of survey respondents) suggested that lack of peer interaction and support was a challenge, for example one student said:

"Very little interaction with other students, feeling very much on my own. Couldn't bounce ideas off other people".

Discussion

Our analysis of students' expectations and experience of 'Start Anytime', suggests that self-paced online study can have considerable benefits for experienced adult learners who have difficulty fitting study around their busy lives. For some students online, self-paced study was clearly more enjoyable and rewarding than studying in a time-tabled unit. The postgraduate units selected for the pilot were chosen in recognition that this group of experienced learners more often study online and part-time because they need to balance study with other aspects of their lives such as work and family (Stone, 2017). Therefore, it is not surprising that want of flexibility was the most common motivator and benefit reported by survey respondents, as well as the main reason why the majority of students (92%) indicated that they would recommend self-paced online study to other students.

For many students, self-paced online study was challenging, especially the requirement for self-management. However, student expectations and experience of both the challenges and benefits of self-paced study were well matched, which suggests that students had realistic expectations at enrolment. For most students the benefits of 'Start anytime' clearly outweighed the challenges. However, variation in students' perceptions of how studying in a 'Start Anytime' unit compared to studying in a timetabled unit (e.g. the difficulty, depth of learning and enjoyment of learning), suggests that some students already use or more easily adopt strategies that help them to manage self-paced online study. This illustrates the importance of ensuring that students know what to expect so that they can judge which modes of study are best suited to their lives and learning context. Sharing vignettes and examples of strategies that students find helpful might also help new students to adopt behaviours that contribute to success. For example, one student suggested:

"Start early, don't leave assignments to [the] last minute, interact with other class mate[s] on [the] cloud and do not [be] afraid to ask questions".

Our results suggest that for most students, communicating with peers is harder in a 'Start Anytime' unit than in a timetabled unit. However, it is telling that few students (only 3 individuals) listed this as a challenge in their open-ended responses. This likely reflects the interests, intent and needs of this cohort of students. The same time constraints that motivated these students to enrol in a 'Start anytime' unit, would likely also make it difficult for them to engage in collaborative learning in timetabled units (regardless of whether they were on-campus or online). This is consistent with other research, which has shown that older and postgraduate students (who also tend to be older) are less likely to be interested in campus life, are less likely to have the time to take advantage of campus life even if they are interested, and are more likely to enrol in at least one online unit of study (excluding research students who are usually required to enrol on a physical campus)(Norton et al., 2013). It is important for students to have choice and opportunities to engage in peer to peer communication; however, flexible learning also means respecting students' choices not to engage with their peers - where they do not need or want to.

Overall, student responses suggest that the measures put in place to support learning in the 'Start anytime' units were equivalent to that provided in timetabled units: the majority of students (80%) indicated that access to learning support and teaching staff was greater (22%) or no different (58%) to that in a timetabled unit. However, future work might explore the experience of the 20% of students who felt that access to support and teaching staff was greater in the timetabled units. This might reflect the preference of individuals for face-to-face interaction or scheduled meetings, or it could reflect reduced help seeking behaviour. Students in the 'Start anytime' units were provided with numerous ways to communicate with teaching staff, but are largely expected to request help as it is required. More frequent teacher instigated interactions might improve the experience of students who are more hesitant to seek help and might serve a dual purpose of providing motivation for students that are inclined to procrastinate.

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