

Preparing to Succeed: an online orientation resource designed for postgraduate study success

Joanne Elliott

Deakin University, Australia

Bianca Frost

Deakin University, Australia

Students who study wholly online have different expectations and face different challenges than students studying on-campus. Similarly, the experience, capabilities and expectations of postgraduate students differ from those of undergraduate students, especially school-leavers. Both online and postgraduate cohorts exhibit high attrition rates, often linked to time constraints, poor preparation and dissatisfaction with learning experiences not tailored to their needs. Yet little attention has been paid to how orientation and transition support might be customised to better accommodate these cohorts. In this paper, we provide a rationale and case study for developing an online narrative-led orientation resource tailored to address issues of affiliation, connection and belonging, specific to postgraduate students.

Keywords: postgraduate orientation, online learning, digital learning design, social learning

Introduction

Increasing numbers of students are enrolling in postgraduate and online courses (Brunton et al., 2016; Norton & Cakitaki, 2016), but these cohorts also have higher attrition rates than traditional, undergraduate, on-campus cohorts (Department of Education and Training, 2017; Moore & Greenland, 2017). It is vital that universities provide effective support for these students to help them complete and succeed in their studies. Early support for students, throughout the period of transition to study, is particularly important for student success (Brunton et al., 2016).

Postgraduate students, and those studying wholly online, have unique circumstances and study support needs. For example, postgraduate students are more likely than undergraduate students to study part-time and balance their studies with part-time or full-time employment and family commitments (Lang, 2002; Norton & Cakitaki, 2016). Academic expectations of postgraduate students in terms of independent study, critical analysis and academic writing are often higher (O'Donnell, Tobbell, Lawthom, & Zammit, 2009) and some postgraduate students struggle to understand and meet these expectations (Bunney, 2017; Heussi, 2012). Postgraduate students are also more likely to study online (Norton & Cakitaki, 2016). Online students often report feeling isolated and disconnected from the university and their peers (Brunton et al., 2016). Indeed these feelings of isolation, alongside poor preparation for study, and dissatisfaction with course content and other university services not customised to the online environment, are often cited by students as reasons for withdrawing from their studies (Brunton et al., 2016).

Student support services, orientation and transition activities are rarely designed with online or postgraduate students in mind, despite acknowledgement that online content needs to be specifically designed for the digital learning environment and the specific needs of online student cohorts (Heussi, 2012; Moore & Greenland, 2017; Stone, 2017). Online learning environments and the role of teaching staff in digital learning delivery may be very different from what students have previously experienced and it is vital that students are adequately prepared for these aspects of online study (Blaschke, 2012). Students need to be able to not only access their learning materials, but also interact with them effectively and have realistic expectations about the flexibility of online study (Brunton et al., 2016; Northcote, Gosselin, Reynaud, Kilgour, & Anderson, 2015). Thomas (2013) argues that universities can better build students' sense of belonging by providing opportunities for meaningful interactions with peers and staff, especially early in their studies. Students also feel a greater sense of belonging when their learning experience is relevant to their interests and goals (Thomas, 2013).

For these reasons, we sought to develop an orientation resource specifically designed for postgraduate online students that not only addressed these factors, but also supported Deakin's broader strategic vision in terms of student engagement, outcomes and approach to best-practice digital learning design.



This work is made available under
a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/) International licence.

Our approach

Deakin addressed a gap in orientation and transition support by developing a new, coherent, digitally-enabled and narrative-based approach to postgraduate orientation for commencing online (Cloud Campus) students. By leveraging key functionalities of the FutureLearn online learning platform, the resulting *Preparing to Succeed* orientation resource was envisaged as means of bringing to life the University's strategic vision of a 'brilliant education' supported by incorporating leading-edge technologies, communications and student support. FutureLearn mirrors this objective by focusing on three key pedagogical principles: 1) learning through story, 2) learning through conversation, and 3) celebrating progress.

Learning through story

While an abundance of information, including learning materials and support resources, are available to postgraduate students online via the Deakin current student and library websites, these had not previously been curated within any single, unifying framework designed specifically for this cohort. By employing a narrative-led introduction to postgraduate life and study preparation at Deakin, an opportunity was identified to address this lack of customisation for commencing online postgraduate students in a memorable and meaningful way. The linear sequencing of interconnected activities and steps (which function much like chapters and sections in a book) combined with the ability to utilise media-rich digital storytelling techniques such as videos and inline hyperlinks, are key features of the FutureLearn platform. These features enabled the possibility of constructing a polyphonic narrative incorporating not only the voices of senior university executives, academics and professional staff, but also foregrounding the experiences of past and present postgraduate students including mature-age students and those undertaking postgraduate study through wholly online programs. By applying conventional storytelling techniques such as a three-part structure (i.e. a beginning, middle and end), the threads of individual stories and perspectives could be woven into a single coherent narrative with logical nodes for embedding useful links and other resources.

Learning through conversation

A key pillar of Deakin's learning philosophy is 'getting involved'. This idea of active participation within the context of socially enabled learning communities is linked to increased student engagement, improved learning outcomes, and stronger connections with other participants (Zhao & Kuh, 2004). The FutureLearn platform supports this by encouraging learners to comment on topics, discuss issues, ask and answer questions and receive feedback on their ideas in a peer-supported learning environment. Coupled with mechanisms for facilitating a strong educator presence, such as videos, posts and contextualised quiz/test feedback responses (e.g., Stone, 2017), it also affords learners multiple opportunities to interact with Deakin academic and professional staff at each and every step. This social and networked learning model encourages students to learn with and from others by sharing insights, experiences and resources (Goodyear, 2005).

Celebrating progress

Key barriers to postgraduate course completion include lack of time and confidence (Brunton et al., 2016). By packaging essential postgraduate orientation information into a single online resource with an estimated completion time of one to two hours (dependant on time spent in conversation, engaging with learning activities or exploring further learning links), commencing online students would be better positioned to allocate and manage their time with a clear end-goal. We anticipated that setting clear parameters for time and effort would encourage more students to complete the course, leading to a sense of achievement and improved confidence. FutureLearn also supports smaller-scale celebration by encouraging learners to use the 'mark as complete' button at the end of each step. This function provides an incremental sense of achievement and confidence by providing students with a cumulative percentage of steps completed on a visual progress bar (e.g., de Raadt & Dekeyser, 2009).

Program design and development

Preparing to Succeed was developed by a cross-functional and interdisciplinary team of academics and professional staff, including learning designers, student support advisors and dedicated Cloud Campus team members. It was structured around three key questions commonly asked by commencing online postgraduate students that also informed a set of clear learning outcomes for the course:

1. How can I be a successful online student?

2. What does Deakin's online learning environment look like and how does it work?
3. Where can I access support services and resources when I need them?

In turn, the learning design was scaffolded around five FutureLearn activities (or themes) comprised of two to four steps (or topics) each, throughout which three simple but important messages were threaded:

1. We want you to succeed.
2. You are not alone.
3. A wide range of services are available to support you.

To connect these ideas, *Preparing to Succeed* employs a simple narrative to trace the postgraduate student journey from getting started and learning with Deakin to planning for success and achieving results. Within this narrative arc, students are introduced to key topics such as goals, time-management, study skills, learning outcomes, online learning environments, tools and platforms, and related student academic, social and wellbeing support services. Its media-rich format includes videos, images, graphics, resource links and other downloadable resources (such as week and trimester planners). To address student demand for peer-to-peer learning and contribute to a stronger sense of peer and institutional affiliation, a concerted effort was made to incorporate a wide spectrum of voices ranging from senior University figures and student support staff to past and present postgraduate students, including coursework and research students completing their degrees with varying components of online study requirements. Drawing on the principles of constructive alignment (Biggs, 1996), each step also includes a 'your task' learning activity designed to encourage students to explore specific resources and share their findings with the group and reflect on their own learning, professional or life experiences to address specific questions. To improve the quality of social interactions, students were encouraged to make use of Brookfield and Preskill's (2005) 'conversational moves', which includes liking or replying to other students' comments, joining threads and posting comments that link, compare or contrast key themes and ideas. Throughout the course, students are supported in conversation by a team of dedicated educators and mentors drawn from the Cloud Campus and academic and peer support teams. One of the highlights of the course is its conclusion, where students are invited to complete an online self-assessment that, via a short questionnaire, delivers a customised report, including recommendations for further orientation activities that can be accessed via *UniStart* – the University's mainstream orientation resource.

Student engagement with Preparing to Succeed

Student participation

In the first trimester it was offered, and with limited communications of promotion, 20 percent of 1,955 commencing online postgraduate students accessed *Preparing to Succeed*. In the following trimester, access to this resource was extended to all commencing postgraduate students regardless of their mode of study. This decision was in recognition of the fact that even students enrolled in on-campus study access many of their learning materials online (Norton & Cakitaki, 2016). The sharing of this resource with all commencing postgraduate students exemplifies the need to ensure that whenever students are accessing an online resource, all supporting resources should be optimised for equity of access within an online environment (e.g. Stone, 2017). In response, the resource content was modified to incorporate information about additional ways in which on-campus students could access support services. However, the emphasis on online study and access was maintained. Across the following four trimesters, 17 percent of all commencing postgraduate students accessed the resource, equalling a total of 1564 students.

Interaction with educators and peers

Since its introduction, 21 percent of the students who accessed the resource posted at least one comment in the discussion forums. These students posted an average of five comments each. The proportion of students commenting has been relatively consistent across the trimester-based course 'runs', ranging between 19 and 24 percent.

Within the discussion forums, students engaged with the educators to reflect on how the resource content related to their circumstances and asked questions about additional resources or areas of interest. Students engaged with their peers by introducing themselves to others studying the same or similar courses, or those with similar experiences and circumstances. They also shared their own study tips and resources with, and expressed support for, other students. When connecting with other students, several students also suggested avenues for connecting

outside of the resource, such as joining existing course-based online communities, creating Facebook groups and connecting via email.

Student feedback

Although we have not yet completed a formal evaluation of the resource, students were asked to provide feedback within the resource. Specifically, they were asked which aspects they found most useful, what we could improve and whether there was anything more they wanted to know. This feedback from students participating in *Preparing to Succeed* suggests that students found the resource useful and enjoyed the opportunity to share ideas and advice with other commencing students. In particular, they commented that they appreciated and were reassured by the amount and variety of support available to them throughout their studies, and the sense of community they felt after engaging with other students and staff within the resource.

Students also indicated that they valued the way the course was structured to allow them to briefly review key content and access more information about topics of particular interest. They also reported that the ‘your task’ in each step provided a clear and timely prompt to reflect on their own learning, knowledge and experiences and in turn inform their future practice, which contributed to a more meaningful orientation experience. This relevance and ability to tailor the learning experience is particularly important for adult learners, who are time-poor and often bring a wealth of relevant experience to their studies (Blaschke, 2012; Sims, 2008).

Several students commented that they had previously only ‘lurked’ in online discussion forums, but were using *Preparing to Succeed* as an opportunity to practice posting so they could more actively participate in their unit discussion forums. ‘Lurking’ (which describes the practice of reading other participants’ comments but not actively posting) is a common and valid method of participation in online discussion forums (Malinen, 2015; Soroka & Rafaeli, 2006). However, actively posting in forums increases opportunities for students to connect more meaningfully not only with each other, but also with teaching staff and learning materials (Balaji & Chakrabarti, 2010; Dawson, 2006).

Conclusion

The unique circumstances and needs of online postgraduate students and the higher attrition rates exhibited by this cohort prompted the development of a dedicated online, narrative-driven orientation resource with a focus on social connection. Preliminary feedback indicates that students valued the customisation of the orientation resources to their cohort and the opportunity to further personalise their experience according to their own needs. They also reported feeling more connected to the university and their peers, and more confident about succeeding in their studies.

References

- Balaji, M. S., & Chakrabarti, D. (2010). Student Interactions in Online Discussion Forum: Empirical Research from ‘Media Richness Theory’ Perspective. *Journal of Interactive Online Learning*, 9(1), 1-22.
- Biggs, J. (1996). Enhancing teaching through constructive alignment. *Higher Education*, 32(3), 347-364. doi:10.1007/bf00138871
- Blaschke, L. M. (2012). Heutagogy and lifelong learning: A review of heutagogical practice and self-determined learning. *2012*, 13(1), 16. doi:10.19173/irrodl.v13i1.1076
- Brookfield, S., & Preskill, S. (2005). *Discussion as a way of teaching : tools and techniques for democratic classrooms* (2nd ed.): San Francisco : Jossey-Bass.
- Brunton, J., Brown, M., Cleary, A., Costello, E., Delaney, L., Fox, S., . . . Ward, J. (2016). *Lost in Transition: A Report on Enabling Success for Flexible Learners*. Dublin, Ireland: Dublin City University.
- Bunney, D. (2017). Facilitating the transition to postgraduate studies: What can we learn from the First Year Experience? *Journal of Academic Language & Learning*, 11(1), A23 - A38.
- Dawson, S. P. (2006). Online forum discussion interactions as an indicator of student community. *Australasian Journal of Educational Technology*, 22(4), 495-510. <https://doi.org/10.14742/ajet.1282>
- de Raadt, M., & Dekeyser, S. (2009). A simple time-management tool for students’ online learning activities. *Same places, different spaces. Proceedings of Ascilite Conference*. Auckland.
- Department of Education and Training. (2017). *Improving retention, completion and success in higher education*. Retrieved from Department of Education and Training website <https://docs.education.gov.au/documents/discussion-paper-improving-completion-retention-and-success-higher-education>

- Goodyear, P. (2005). Educational design and networked learning: Patterns, pattern languages and design practice. *Australasian Journal of Educational Technology*, 21(1). doi:<https://doi.org/10.14742/ajet.1344>
- Heussi, A. (2012). Postgraduate student perceptions of the transition into postgraduate study. *Student Engagement and Experience Journal*, 1(3), 1 - 13. <https://doi.org/10.7190/seej.v1i3.52>
- Lang, C. (2002). *Addressing the transition needs of coursework post-graduate students*. Paper presented at the The Sixth Pacific Rim - First Year in Higher Education Conference: Changing Agendas "Te Ao Hurihuri", The University of Canterbury in conjunction with Queensland University of Technology. Christchurch, New Zealand. http://www.fyhe.qut.edu.au/FYHE_Previous/papers02/LangPaper.doc
- Malinen, S. (2015). Understanding user participation in online communities: A systematic literature review of empirical studies. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 46, 228-238. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2015.01.004>
- Moore, C., & Greenland, S. (2017). Employment-driven online student attrition and the assessment policy divide: An Australian open-access higher education perspective. *Journal of Open, Flexible and Distance Learning*, 21(1), 52-62. <https://doi.org/10.61468/jofdl.v21i1.286>
- Northcote, M., Gosselin, K. P., Reynaud, D., Kilgour, P., & Anderson, M. (2015). Navigating learning journeys of online teachers: Threshold concepts and self-efficacy. *Issues in Educational Research*, 25(3), 319-343.
- Norton, A., & Cakitaki, B. (2016). *Mapping Australian higher education 2016* (978-1-925015-88-1). Retrieved from Grattan Institute website <http://grattan.edu.au/report/mapping-australian-higher-education-2016/>
- O'Donnell, V. L., Tobbell, J., Lawthom, R., & Zammit, M. (2009). Transition to postgraduate study: Practice, participation and the widening participation agenda. *Active Learning in Higher Education*, 10(1), 26-40. doi:10.1177/1469787408100193
- Sims, R. (2008). Rethinking (e)learning: a manifesto for connected generations. *Distance Education*, 29(2), 153-164. doi:10.1080/01587910802154954
- Soroka, V., & Rafaeli, S. (2006). *Invisible participants: how cultural capital relates to lurking behavior*. Paper presented at the Proceedings of the 15th international conference on World Wide Web, Edinburgh, Scotland. <https://doi.org/10.1145/1135777.1135806>
- Stone, C. (2017). *Opportunity through Online Learning: Improving student access, participation and success in higher education*. Perth: The National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education (NCSEHE), Curtin University.
- Thomas, L. (2013). What works? Facilitating an effective transition into higher education. *Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning*, 14(1), 4-24. doi:10.5456/WPLL.14.S.4
- Zhao, C.-M., & Kuh, G. D. (2004). Adding Value: Learning Communities and Student Engagement. *Research in Higher Education*, 45(2), 115-138. doi:10.1023/B:RIHE.0000015692.88534.de

Please cite as: Elliott, J. & Frost, B. (2018). Preparing to Succeed: an online orientation resource designed for postgraduate study success. In M. Campbell, J. Willems, C. Adachi, D. Blake, I. Doherty, S. Krishnan, S. Macfarlane, L. Ngo, M. O'Donnell, S. Palmer, L. Riddell, I. Story, H. Suri & J. Tai (Eds.), *Open Oceans: Learning without borders*. Proceedings ASCILITE 2018 Geelong (pp. 351-355).

<https://doi.org/10.14742/apubs.2018.1968>