

# Digital equity: Diversity, inclusion and access for incarcerated students in a digital age

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eLearning has been touted as the way in which universities can enable participation by large numbers of students from non-traditional cohorts. There is no doubt that the flexibility of access that eLearning allows makes study accessible for a number of cohorts, including those engaged in full-time work or caring duties. However, cohorts such as incarcerated students and other students without Internet access, are sitting on the wrong side of the digital divide and are increasingly marginalised by the very technology anticipated to overcome their exclusion from study. This paper examines the fundamental issues of equity involved with eLearning, and particularly for incarcerated students. The very issue of access to the Internet is fraught with rates of access varying widely between different sectors of society. This discussion prompts higher education providers to think beyond business-as-usual when speaking of increasing participation in higher education.

## Introduction

The notion of equity is challenging to define in any context especially when we use the term 'equity' in regards to teaching and learning in higher education. Unlike the foundational centuries of privileged male access to higher education, with the rise of the Internet and digital technology, the opportunities for access and participation in higher education have broadened; yet some barriers remain (Anderson, 2015). Digital equity – and inversely, the perpetuation of the digital divide – are significant human rights issues (La Rue, 2011). There are many aspects of the issue to be discussed in this space. Equity relates to access. It also relates to inclusion.

This paper aims to open a dialogue about teaching and learning for digital equity, to identify issues that are still present despite technological advances, and to identify what the implications are for teaching and learning in a digital age. This paper will focus on one particular cohort that is becoming increasingly marginalised as universities move their course offerings online: incarcerated students. In every state and territory of Australia, prisoners are prohibited from directly accessing the internet and as universities move away from delivering printed materials, this sector of the population are even further disadvantaged (Farley, 2016).

## Progress towards achieving digital equity

Participation in higher education cannot be taken for granted. With increasing access by women to higher

education from the 1800s (Eschbach, 2017), the rise in distance professional education opportunities late in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Matthews, 1999), and Australian Indigenous peoples from the mid-1900s (Andersen, Bunda & Wallter, 2008), progress is being made. Australian government acknowledgement of the existence of equity groups in higher education from the 1960s, through policy documents, also helped to raise the profile of the issue. In more recent times, the publication of the Bradley Report in 2008 firmly moved equity onto the agendas of most Australian universities.

The increased prevalence and sophistication of digital technologies and the internet from the 1980s, opened the doors for potentially greater opportunity for participation in higher education (Selwyn, 2010). Electronic access to course materials and course activities enables many students, otherwise unable to participate in face-to-face activities on campus, to participate in higher education. This digital access is often heralded as the way in which higher education institutions can enable participation by large numbers of students from non-traditional cohorts (Selwyn & Gorard, 2003; Sims, Vidgen, & Powell, 2008). Students are able to study in a range of modes (full-time or part-time; on-campus or at a distance), have variable enrolment patterns to accommodate their particular



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circumstances, and are able to enter higher education through a variety of bridging programs.<sup>1</sup>

Though programs have become ever more flexible since the 1980s, the necessity of accessing programs via a learning management system (LMS) remains a constant, irrespective of the mode of study, be it in a blended or distance mode (Farley, 2013). In this way, higher education institutions can claim that they are increasing participation of previously under-served and marginalised groups of students in higher education. These cohorts include mature-aged students who have employment and have carer responsibilities (Selwyn, 2007).

However, this increasing reliance on digital technology for teaching and learning in higher education presupposes ubiquitous connectivity, that is, a reliance on the internet. For many cohorts, including those in regional and remote Australia, ubiquitous connectivity is no more than an aspiration (Freeman & Park, 2015; Willems, 2010). However, the reality remains that 53 percent of the world's population does not have access to the internet (ICT Data and Statistics Division, 2016). With the increasing internationalisation of education, this is likely to remain a problem for universities into the foreseeable future. Further, it cannot be assumed that internet access is assured in first-world countries like Australia (Farley & Hopkins, 2016). In fact, there are vast tracts of Australia that are neither served by the internet either to the home or through mobile reception (3G, 4G) (Park, 2016). And even of those who can theoretically access the Internet, a certain proportion cannot afford to use it (Wilson, 2013). The internet access plans offered by service providers can be prohibitively expensive for those families with one or no income, high costs of healthcare or childcare, or high housing costs. Overlay this with issues of power connectivity or stability, and/or the ability to access computer hardware and software (Willems, 2010), the reality of the barriers start to become apparent.

As such, issues remain (Willems, 2013) and can easily pale into the background with the hype of new digital horizons. On May 16 2011, the United Nations declared that access to the internet was a human right. That statement has implications for governments in terms of the provision of infrastructure, hardware, social access and so on (La Rue, 2011). Even given this acknowledged right, the harsh reality is that minorities all over the world are accessing the Internet at lower rates than those mainstream users. This is not just a factor on distant shores. In Australia, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are 69 percent less likely than the mainstream population to have an Internet connection and 52 percent less likely to have a broadband connection (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2008). Though these figures are a

little dated and are no doubt changing, this discrepancy will still exist (Rennie, Hogan, Gregory, Crouch, Wright & Thomas, 2016).

## The incarcerated population – a case in point

One cohort traditionally marginalised from participation in higher education are incarcerated students (Farley, 2016). To highlight some of the barriers that exist, prisoners in most Australian jurisdictions are prohibited from accessing the internet. Universities are beginning to desert this cohort due to the difficulties and high costs associated with provisioning them with access to higher education. Given that a post-secondary qualification potentially reduces rates of recidivism by some 40 per cent, it seems this is the cohort most in need of such an education (Davis, Bozick et al., 2013).

Indeed, the most disenfranchised group of young people are those that have made an early entry into the criminal justice system and have found themselves in correctional centres serving custodial sentences (Gardner, 2009). This is especially true for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, who are almost 15 times more likely to be incarcerated than other Australians (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs, 2010). In Australia, 35 percent of all prisoners are aged less than 30 years of age, with about half of these aged less than 25 years (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2013). These young people face an uncertain post-release future due to limited education opportunities and employment discrimination (Visher, Debus-Sherrill, & Yahner, 2011).

The situation is even worse for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people that comprise just 2% of the general population (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011), yet 27 percent of the total prisoner population (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2013). In many cases, a lack of education may have contributed to their incarceration; Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are half as likely as other Australian students to complete Year 12 (Wong, 2008). Low levels of education remain a key driver of the ongoing cycle that leads to the over-representation of Indigenous Australians in the criminal justice system. And a lack of education will make it even harder for them to secure employment upon release from incarceration in an increasingly tight job market. Even if they do find employment, they are likely to receive lower wages than others of a similar age and background who have not been incarcerated (Visher et al., 2011). This prohibition from prisoners using the internet, coupled with limited access to computer hardware and software, ensures that

<sup>1</sup> These bridging programs generally allow students who have not finished year 12 or who have completed with an insufficient score

to enter into a range of undergraduate programs.

this cohort rarely break the endless cycle of offending and incarceration. Access to higher education is one way in which prisoners could interrupt this cycle (Farley, 2017).

### How incarcerated students currently access higher education

In Australia, around 1.5 per cent of eligible prisoners access higher education. This varies significantly across various states and territories with around 6.2 per cent of eligible Queensland prisoners accessing higher education (ROGS, 2017). Until very recently, correctional centres in some states were unable to facilitate prisoner enrolment in tertiary programs. For example, prisoners in the Northern Territory had access neither to the technology or to the support that would enable them to participate in higher education.

In some jurisdictions, prisoners have access to computer labs where eight or ten computers are networked to an isolated server. Hardware and software are typically out of date and poorly maintained. In the Australian Capital Territory, prisoners have access to in-cell computers running on a Linux platform. Certain websites are whitelisted, i.e. can be accessed by prisoners but the degree of access is not sufficient for prisoners to undertake university study. This same system does allow limited emails to five email addresses. This enables parents or partners to access materials on behalf of the incarcerated student.

In other jurisdictions, education officers would work with prisoners to download course materials and to load them onto correctional centre computers (without access to the internet). Alternative arrangements are made to accommodate assessments with education officers very often searching for and downloading journal articles and other resources that enable prisoners to complete assignments. Correctional centres are very often registered as exam centres so that prisoners can complete exams. All of these measures place a considerable burden on both education and custodial staff.

The only large-scale project that is enabling prisoners to access higher education with technology is the University of Southern Queensland-led Making the Connection project. To date, this project has enrolled over 1000 prisoners into five programs in Queensland, Tasmania, Western Australia and the Northern Territory. The project uses two technologies: 1) a server-based solution, and 2) notebook computers that are not able to be connected to the internet. A version of their Learning Management System which doesn't rely on internet access is installed onto these technologies to enable access to courses and programs.

### Discussion: What can universities do to overcome these barriers?

There are a number of strategies that universities can adopt in order to overcome these inadvertent barriers to digital equity. With equity centres established in several Australian universities and some federal funding tied to equity targets, there are good social and economic reasons for universities to better serve equity cohorts.

First, provision must be made so that these excluded students are able to access the technologies that they need to participate. This would include hardware, software and access to the Internet (Sims et al., 2008; Farley, 2016). Though this sounds relatively uncomplicated, there are certain instances where the provision of Internet access will just not be possible. For example, it is difficult to imagine a time when incarcerated students in Australian jurisdictions will ever have access to the Internet.

Second, it is not enough to supply access to the technology to enable participation in eLearning. Those potential students must be shown how to use the technology that they have never had access to (Sims et al., 2008). For example, in the case of incarcerated students, they may have been incarcerated since before a particular technology became available on a mainstream basis. In a University of Southern Queensland pilot project with incarcerated students, some students reported that they had never seen or handled a smart phone (Farley, Murphy & Bedford, 2014). It is also conceivable that a prisoner will have been in custody since before tablets such as iPads became available. Before educators can expect a student to deal with this kind of technology, the student must be taught how to use it.

Third, and overlaying the above points, those who have not previously participated in higher education will not have any cultural capital and will most likely have low educational attainment to this point. The same is likely to be true of their families and close circle of friends. Pedagogies that are used must take this into account and be appropriate for the cohorts that are to be included (Sims et al., 2008). Being first in the family, especially for distance learners in remote communities, can raise issue of its own (Willems, 2014; Willems, 2010). This can be very difficult to influence and change within universities due to the high level of autonomy of many teaching academics (Sims et al., 2008).

These potential solutions pre-suppose that access to technologies and the chance to engage with higher education is the main reason why preventing these groups from participating (Selwyn & Gorard, 2003). It is most likely that the situation is far more complex. There are likely to be other issues at play such as a lack of appropriate role models, the necessity to work or engage

in other activities that compete for the potential student's time, and a whole raft of cultural, social, health and economic issues. Any potential solution will have to involve an active engagement with all stakeholders and a holistic approach to not only dealing with the lack of access to Internet and other technologies, but also tackle those social, cultural and other issues which may be at play. There is also likely to be heightened needs in terms of support both from a technical point of view and from a personal and educational point of view. Generic skills such as time management, prioritising competing demands and generic writing skills will also need to be part of the solution.

## Conclusion

Highlighting the continuing digital divide is not a popular or 'edgy' topic of scholarly output, yet it is crucial to the continuing development of our sector, and for the scholarship of teaching and learning. It is also an issue of humanity. From the discussion of the layers of considerations in and around equity, and specifically educationally equity and with the notion of launching the ASCILITE Digital Equity Special Interest Group (SIG).

Though the rhetoric is that eLearning is able to increase participation in higher education by non-traditional cohorts, the reality is that it is also preventing many of those people from participating. Delivery of course materials and activities through the learning management system and through the Internet is problematic, when the distribution of that access is not democratic in itself. Many minority groups are able to access the Internet and all that it holds at a significantly lower rate as compared to mainstream users. This can be both because of the lack of access to the appropriate technologies (including the Internet) or because of the costs associated with that access. Even given this lack of access, there may be a large number of other factors at play which combine to decrease participation of marginalised cohorts in higher education. Any serious attempt to encourage these cohorts to participate in higher education via eLearning must include strategies to deal with other sources of disenfranchisement which may be due to cultural, social, economic or health issues. Only in this way will the rhetoric match the reality.

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