The Challenges of Teaching and Learning on the Edge of Academe

A Qualitative Case Study of Student and Tutor Participants in a First Year Online Unit

by

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Author’s Declaration

I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work which has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary education institution. Ethics clearance was obtained from Murdoch University for this study (ethics approval number: 2014/151).

[Author]
Abstract

This case study examines the experiences of participants in a core online Humanities unit situated at the nexus of three trends salient to contemporary higher education in Australia and internationally. Widening student participation seeks to include a broader range of social backgrounds from which students commonly enter the university, and to build a more socially just and educated society. Flexible online learning is embraced by universities as a way to achieve enrolment growth and demonstrate innovativeness. Casualisation of academic teaching is fuelled by tightened government funding for universities leading to an emphasis on cost-cutting and flexible human resource practices. These three trends propel the growth of two peripheral groups in the academy; non-traditional students who study online, and casual academic staff. This study aims to increase understanding and awareness of the impact that these trends and pressures have on those who operate on the periphery of university life in the current higher education climate.

This case study involved a small number of students and tutors who had recently participated in a first year online unit, pseudonymously named ATU100 for this research. The study is situated within a qualitative/interpretivist research approach with a focus on developing deep and detailed understandings of the experiences of research participants. Qualitative research methods, including in-depth interviews, questionnaires, and document analysis were utilised within an instrumental case study framework, which is one that emphasises the “micro-macro link in social behaviour” (Gerring, 2007, p. 1) and serves to advance understanding of a wider issue. Data were analysed using a combination of processes derived from Constructivist Grounded Theory and Thematic Analysis methods. Links between the experiences of the individuals involved in the case study and ideas of social justice in relation to pressures within contemporary higher education were foregrounded throughout.

Findings are detailed and explored through three articles and suggest that while non-traditional students can experience positive and transformative learning through online study, online tutors are negatively affected by their casual status. Empowerment was an outcome of participation in the unit for the majority of the students who were involved in the study. The inclusion model of social justice, which emphasises outcomes for individuals, captures the transformative value of the opportunities that online learning provides for these students. Conversely, the tutors who participated in the study reported feelings of disempowerment. Findings from the tutor participants indicated that
their experience was constrained within a marketised and competitive higher education environment where, paradoxically, teaching quality is of crucial importance yet casual teachers are marginalised and rendered invisible.

Implications of the case study show the importance of understanding and nurturing the mutually beneficial relationship between universities and non-traditional students that policies for widening student participation can foster, and of acknowledging the significant role online learning plays in providing access for these students. It is important to recognise the effectiveness of online delivery for successful students and to make this mode of delivery more visible within university spaces, along with investing in an identified resource that is highly valued by students, the teaching staff. Also important is acknowledging the integral place of casual academic teachers within the academy, and beginning discussions which problematise the dichotomy between casual and permanent academic staff and which seek to redesign the casual academic role. These implications are key to moving online students and casual academics from the edge of academe to a more central place in the academy.

A note on formatting and style:
This EdD thesis comprises three research articles which were submitted to peer reviewed academic journals for publication. These articles are the outcome of three associated research phases and present the major findings. The opening chapters of the thesis introduce and contextualise the study according to existing literature, and outline methodology. The closing chapters summarise and discuss the findings from the articles and explore their implications.
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Thanks and love go to my family for all your patience with me on this long doctoral journey.

Thanks to all who listened and lent me their support over this past six years.
Dedication

I dedicate this thesis to my mother, Diane Hawking, whose educational journey has always inspired me and made me proud.
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Chapter 1  Introduction

1.1 Overview

Universities worldwide must deal with shifting trends in higher education. The responses that universities make may have a profound impact on those who participate in the day to day activity of university teaching and learning. In a climate of reduced government funding (Probert, 2016), universities become more focused on marketing university education to expanded numbers of students in order to generate revenue through student tuition fees (Barcan, 2016). At the same time, governments promote higher education as a way to build national competitiveness in an era of globalisation and knowledge economies (Vingaarg Johansen et al., 2017), and to create more inclusive, socially just, and educated societies (Marginson, 2010). Funding is then incentivised towards widening university access to underrepresented sections of the population who were previously not part of the traditional university student cohort (Gale & Tranter, 2011). Technology plays a significant role in both participating in the knowledge economy and providing a means for larger numbers of students to access university education (Fırat, 2017). Marketisation in the face of funding cuts also emphasises the reduction of costs. One way this is achieved is through adopting flexible employment practices which have seen the rise of casualised academic teaching (Williams & Beovich, 2017), whereby those who carry out the teaching work of the university are increasingly casual academics with no permanent role in the university.

The purpose of this study is to examine the experiences of students and teaching academics in a core humanities unit delivered online by a major Australian university. The unit is one in which the effects of these trends within the contemporary higher education climate are apparent. In Australian terminology, a unit is a discrete component of study normally taken for the duration of a semester, the combination of which comprise the degree. This is equivalent to a ‘course’ in North American terminology. For research purposes, this unit is pseudonymously referred to as ATU100.

Designed to be taken in the first semester or study period of a Bachelor of Arts degree, ATU100 focuses on equipping students to successfully transition to life at university by developing their understanding of the academic conventions and discourse practices used in the Humanities. It gives students 25 credit points of the 100 points that...
make up a full time load per semester. Amongst other modes, ATU100 is available as a fully online unit delivered through Open Universities Australia (OUA).

OUA works with partner universities to enable students to graduate with a degree which is completely equivalent to that obtained by students who enrol in these universities directly (Open Universities Australia, 2019). Students enrol through OUA, in some cases without any academic pre-requisites, but become students of the university that offers the degree and study fully online within the university’s learning management system (LMS). They also have the opportunity to study single units and to mix in units from other partner universities (Open Universities Australia, 2019). ATU100 students may therefore have various degree pathways or none at all. Domestic students can access income support while they are studying and defer their fee payments through the Australian government higher education system (https://www.studyassist.gov.au/). OUA operates four study periods per year, rather than two semesters, allowing flexible enrolments throughout the year (Open Universities Australia, 2019). Consequently, units offered through OUA, such as ATU100, are comprised of students from highly diverse backgrounds and levels of academic preparedness, and with different purposes for their study. The teaching staff for ATU100 are primarily casual academics who teach online classes comprising of up to 100 students under the guidance of a unit coordinator.

This research is concerned particularly with the OUA version of the unit as it is situated at the nexus of the pressures and characteristics which are salient to contemporary higher education in Australia and internationally. When viewed through this lens, the unit may be seen as a representative microcosm reflective of the impacts that major, macro-level trends have on higher education teaching and learning. These impacts are explored through three articles which are associated with the research phases that comprise the study.

The case study focused on the lived experience of 12 students in the unit, who were new to university from non-traditional and/or disadvantaged backgrounds, and seven tutors in the unit, or instructors in US terminology, who were casual academics without permanent academic positions. In so doing, this study highlights the influence of the current university climate on the experiences of those who teach and learn on the academic margins which exist not only in Australian universities but in universities globally. The students and tutors involved in ATU100 represent two groups who
participate in learning spaces on the edge of academe which are created as a result of the contemporary pressures in higher education. These peripheral spaces are away from the visible mainstream of academic life and those who work and study within these spaces lack presence on campus and may lack recognition and inclusion within the academy as a result.

The teaching and learning within this unit is affected in complex and inter-related ways by these three major trends:

- **Widening student participation**: Widening and increasing student participation as a strategy to universalise higher education. This has created the need for core units such as ATU100 to address issues regarding the academic success and retention of the increasing number of students from non-traditional backgrounds.

- **Flexible online learning**: Embracing flexible, on-line modes of delivery as a way for universities to achieve enrolment growth and demonstrate innovation.

- **Casualisation of academic teaching**: Adopting flexible employment practices in response to tightened government funding, resulting in the growing casualisation of university teaching.

This thesis highlights the effects of these trends on the research participants’ experiences in ATU100, through three research articles which were submitted to peer reviewed academic journals for publication. These articles present the major findings from each phase of the case study together with discussions of associated theories and contexts.
1.2 Personal Background to the Study

My personal interest in this research arose from my own experience as a casual (or sessional) academic in the unit which I have named ATU100. A number of concerns became apparent over my time teaching the unit. I noticed a lack of preparation for the casual academics who tutor in the unit to transfer their teaching skills from the face-to-face to the online environment. Initial and ongoing training in both the technological and pedagogical aspects of the tutor role in online learning spaces were very limited or non-existent. There was also little emphasis on equipping tutors to understand and cope effectively with the unique nature of the students in online, and often open access, higher education.

The online students who participate in ATU100 are extremely diverse, with a high proportion of students who may be categorised as ‘non-traditional’ or ‘disadvantaged’. Some of these students need to develop the skills and understandings necessary for university level study very nearly from scratch. The literature reviewed in Chapter 2 discusses these terms in more detail and suggests a number of challenges for these students, particularly regarding retention. Also noted in the literature review section is the important role of the tutor in facilitating success for both online and new-to-university students, particularly from non-traditional backgrounds. However,
observing the working conditions of the casual academic tutors in the unit, I noticed that opportunities to grow in their understanding of these important areas appeared to be very limited, thus potentially affecting the quality of their teaching. Additionally, it was clear that tutors were personally impacted by the tenuousness of their terms of employment and the apparent lack of regard afforded them by the university. These observations together with the literature indicated that the participants in ATU100, and units like it, may confront major challenges arising from the teaching and learning conditions they experience.

In contrast, I could observe the transformational benefits students derived from participating in the unit and the greater confidence and self-esteem they developed as a result. Many students were extremely enthusiastic about the unit and placed a high value on the access to university study that online delivery affords. I could also see the tutors’ dedication towards their students and the deep satisfaction they derived from facilitating student success. Tutors strove towards professionalism and excellence in their work and to meet their students’ needs in the best way they could. These observations seemed to be contradictory to the challenges outlined above and I became increasingly concerned about the implications of these contradictions for social justice.

The rationale put forward by the Australian government for policies which aim to widen student participation includes a recognition of the value of “…educational opportunities for all, not just a few” (Australian Government, 2009, p. 5) and a vision “…to allow each individual to develop and reach their potential” (p. 7). This seems to align squarely with principles of social justice and social inclusion. However, a wider economic rationale for widening student participation is also firmly in place, with the stated goal being to “…change and enlarge Australia’s economic potential” (p. 5). For the casual academics working in Australian universities, the emphasis seems to be all on the side of economic rationalism, with little evidence of concern for their wellbeing or development (Percy & Beaumont, 2008; Rothengatter & Hil, 2013). I wanted to understand the complexities at work in ATU100 and how these are situated in the higher education landscape within which the unit operates. It was this desire that led me to undertake this research study.

1.3 Research aims and questions

The aim in undertaking this research was to increase understanding of the ways in which contemporary trends and practices in Australian higher education shape the
experiences of the participants who operate on the periphery of university life. Those placed at the edges of academe may find themselves in this position for a number of complex reasons. For students these reasons relate to personal circumstances such as low socio-economic status, ethnic background including language barriers, Indigeneity, location, disability and being first in family to attend university (Gale & Mills, 2013; Stone, 2017). For university staff, reasons include contemporary employment practices, reduced funding and resources, and competitive working environments (Percy & Beaumont, 2008). These students and staff are diverse, and substantial in number. This research delves deeply into the experiences of a small number of individuals who are known to have shared experiences and histories within this peripheral space. By exploring the lived experience of a small selection tutors and students involved in ATU100, greater awareness of the influence of current trends within Australian universities may be gained. These trends create downward pressure on the capabilities of both the students and tutors to enjoy a rich and rewarding experience within the university. These pressures are also widely felt in higher education globally (Stromquist, 2017b).

On the one hand, students are able to enter a university course for which they may have limited skills to succeed (James, 2010). They may struggle to take on a university learner identity due to limited understanding of what university study entails, and the outcome of their studies may not be what they hoped for (Scanlon, Rowling, & Weber, 2007). Many are in circumstances which, for valid reasons, prevent them from following the traditional on-campus university route. While online university study should be seen as a valuable opportunity for increasing student access, this is negated if these students’ chances of success are limited (Engstrom & Tinto, 2008).

On the other hand, casual academics are rarely given time to develop a deeper understanding of the students and their needs. Activities such as becoming familiar with new developments in the literature, conducting pedagogical research to inform appropriate responses, or building understandings through collaboration with colleagues, for example, are not within casual academics’ remit (Percy & Beaumont, 2008). This may result in causal academics feeling a sense of stagnation and isolation within the academy. While changes to employment policies at the institutional level may be the best solution, there are very few indications of positive change occurring in this area (Probert, 2016; Chan, 2017).
For both students and tutors, these circumstances have implications for equity and social justice, although in different ways. Both equity and social justice are concerned with what is ‘good’ and ‘right’ in society, giving these concepts an ethical dimension. They are therefore “highly debatable and susceptible to varied interpretation (Okoye, 2009, p. 615) and defining them is a complex task. A major focus of the case study was to explore these concepts in relation to the experiences of the ATU100 students and tutors within the contemporary higher education climate.

In response to this, my research aims were as follows:

1. To gain a deeper understanding of how current trends in higher education are experienced by students and tutors in ATU100; (Okoye, 2009)

2. To explore the implications of these experiences in relation to equity and social justice.

Correspondingly, the following are the major research questions for this study:

1) **Over-arching questions**

a) How are current trends in higher education influencing the teaching and learning experiences of the online students and casual teaching academics who are placed on the edge of the academy?

b) What are the implications in regards to equity in higher education and social justice?

2) **Students**

a) What are the motivations, needs, and objectives of ATU100 students in enrolling in the unit and are these fulfilled through their experience?

b) What does this imply for equity and social justice in student participation?

3) **Tutors**

a) What effect does their casual status have on tutors’ capacity to effectively participate in the academic community, find fulfilment in their work, and assist students to transition to academic life?
b) What does this imply for equity and social justice in the higher education workplace?

The research questions are addressed through the articles shown in Chapters 4, 5 and 6 below. These articles are associated with three different phases which comprise the structure of case study, and represent the research output of each phase. They detail and discuss the major findings for each of the phases. Table 1 outlines the relationship between the study’s research aims, research questions and the individual articles.

**Table 1-1: Relationship between the study's research aims, major research questions and the individual articles**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Research aims addressed</th>
<th>Major research questions addressed</th>
<th>Research questions specific to the article</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Article 1: Students flourish and tutors wither: A study of participant experiences in a first-year online unit</td>
<td>Research Aim 1</td>
<td>1a: How are current higher education trends influencing the teaching and learning experiences of the online students and casual teaching academics who are placed on the edge of the academy?</td>
<td>How do students and tutors experience the higher education teaching and learning conditions produced by three contemporary trends- wider student participation, flexible online learning, and casualisation of academic teaching?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Article 2: Fairness and Inclusion: Online learning as an enabler of Australian higher education policies aimed at student equity and social justice</td>
<td>Research Aims 1 &amp; 2</td>
<td>2a: What are the motivations, needs, and objectives of ATU100 students in enrolling in the unit and are these fulfilled through their experience?</td>
<td>To what extent are the objectives of ATU100 students met through their experience of studying online and what does this imply for equity and social justice?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Article 3: Hidden in plain sight: Higher Education’s non-recognition of casual academics and their value

Research aims 1 & 2

3a: What effect does their casual status have on tutors’ capacity to effectively participate in the academic community and find fulfilment in their work, and to assist students to transition to academic life?

3b: What does this imply for equity and social justice in the higher education workplace?

How important is the contribution of casual teaching academics to the higher education sector in Australia?

To what extent do the working conditions of casual teaching academics reflect the importance of their contribution?

How does this compare to the situation in similar countries?

1.4 Significance of the Study

ATU100 can be seen as illustrative of the way in which three major trends affect higher education teaching and learning. As outlined above, these trends are: widening student participation; flexible, online learning; and the casualisation of academic teaching. This research is of value in bringing to awareness the impact that these macro-level trends have on those who participate in university teaching and learning, particularly the students and tutors placed on its periphery. In this way, the influence of current higher education trends on the lived reality of a section of the university community becomes clearer.

Over the past decade, successive Australian government policies have sought to widen higher education access to students from disadvantaged and/or underrepresented social groups, and to position student equity as a major focus of universities (Australian Government, 2009; Department of Education and Training, 2013, 2016, 2017). Therefore, it is important to gain an understanding of how students from these groups experience such opportunities. These target groups include people from low socio-economic status (SES) backgrounds, those who live in regional and remote locations, and those with physical or mental health disabilities (Baik, Naylor, & Arkoudis, 2015), among others.

For many disadvantaged students, online learning is an important means of gaining access to university study (Stone, 2017). This case study provides insight into the experiences of a small number students in the context of one online unit in which
students from disadvantaged groups are well represented. It aimed to develop a richly
detailed knowledge of these students’ experiences in the current higher education
landscape and a deeper understanding of their motivations, needs and hopes. This is of
importance as the number of online students and the range of courses offered through
online modes of delivery increase. Of particular interest here is the combination of the
students’ non-traditional status and the online nature of their learning site. These two
areas are generally treated as separate and discrete in the literature. This case study
brought these two areas together by examining the experiences of non-traditional
students within a fully online course.

The casualisation of university teaching is a trend that looks set to keep growing
in the future given the lack of serious attempts by governments or universities to
address the issue (Probert, 2016). Although social justice and equity is emphasised
through policies which seek to universalise higher education for students, there is a gap
in addressing the need for justice and equity in the working conditions of those who
carry out university teaching (Stromquist, 2017b). Working conditions within higher
education are being driven by a flexible human resource model which may benefit the
organisation, but rarely benefits the casual teaching staff (Bexley, James, & Arkoudis,
2011).

It is important to understand the implications of the isolation and marginalisation
casual academics face, which may be exacerbated in online learning spaces. This
research attempted to capture and gain insight into the interaction between a small
number of ATU100 online tutors and their students, relate this to the tutors’ role and
standing within the academy, and explore the professional and personal impacts which
arise therefrom. This case study furthers understanding of the value of casual academic
teachers within higher education and the importance of ensuring quality in their
professional experience.
Chapter 2  Review of the Literature

2.1  Introduction

This research is an in-depth study of the participant experience in the online teaching and learning site of a key academic transition unit, pseudonymously named ATU100. It is offered by a major public university and delivered through Open Universities Australia (OUA). The nature of this learning and teaching site and its participants positions it at the nexus of a number of complex pressures occurring in contemporary higher education in Australia and internationally.

The face of Australian universities has changed considerably over the last three to four decades in line with global trends. One such trend is the widening and expanding of higher education as a key national aim (Gale, 2014, p. 258). In the Australian context, Bexley et al., (2011, p. 2) state that “[t]here has been a rapid increase in student participation in recent decades (and) participation is likely to increase further in coming years”. Released in 2008, the Review of Higher Education Report, more commonly known as the Bradley Review, recommended that the percentage of the Australian population aged between 24 to 35 years old holding a Bachelor degree or above should rise to 40% by 2020, compared to 29% at the time of writing the report, and that 20% of these degree holders should be from low socio-economic status (SES) backgrounds (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent, & Scales, 2008).

In 2009, the Australian Government adopted and committed funding to implement these recommendations (Australian Government, 2009), later extending the timetable from 2020 to 2025. It was also announced that the government would remove caps on student places from 2012, thus making room for further enrolments through a demand-driven funding system (Australian Government, 2009) in which higher education providers are able to enrol as many students as they wish in a majority of courses. Although these policies have been challenged by subsequent governments, Probert (2016) states that universities in Australia are now moving towards a universal higher education system. The provision of education on this scale is facilitated through flexible modes of delivery, particularly online learning (Fırat, 2017), as well as through an adaptable human resource model which has resulted in the casualisation of academic staff as the ideal (Chan, 2017, p. 7).

These trends in higher education are illustrated in ATU100 in three important
Diverse entry pathways into university and a variety of enrolment options are key elements in widening student participation. There has been a rapid growth of a ‘non-traditional’ student body comprised of those from social groups not traditionally associated with university attendance. These students may not be equipped with the understandings they need to succeed in the academic environment (James, 2010) and units such as ATU100 have come into existence largely to address this issue. Flexible online course delivery that is not tied to on-campus attendance is another key aspect of universal higher education. ATU100 is offered fully online through OUA, making this unit available to students who are not able to attend university campuses. Concurrently, government funding for higher education has become more uncertain and regulatory pressures have increased (Baré & Bexley, 2017, p. 133). This has contributed to changed employment patterns in universities, with stagnation in the number of permanent academic positions and a rise in casualised teaching (Baré & Bexley, 2017). The majority of tutors involved in ATU100 are casual academics and face associated working conditions.

These three major trends, which are currently being felt across Australian higher education and in many other countries, intersect in the unit and create a learning space that is placed on the edge of academe. It is the teaching and learning conditions that these trends create and how these conditions are experienced by students and teachers, that are the focus of this research.

This literature review will first give an overview of contemporary higher education internationally and then focus more specifically on each of the three major trends: widening student participation; flexible online learning; and the casualisation of academic teaching. While there is a wealth of literature in each of these categories, there is little that draws these threads together and examines how they interact in their impact on higher education teaching and learning. This literature review is a starting point in developing an understanding of each of these trends as they relate to the exploration of their combined effects in the research site.

2.2 Global Contemporary Higher Education

The three major trends that are the focus of this research, as outlined above, are not isolated to Australian higher education. Instead, there is a wide occurrence of these same pressures internationally. This section therefore gives a brief overview of the international higher education climate in which the teaching and learning conditions
examined in ATU100 emerge.

### 2.2.1 New managerialism

Since the 1990s, neo-liberal ideas have influenced higher education everywhere towards “financial rationales, competitive capitalist markets, and business templates” (Marginson, 2010, p. 18). New managerialism is the process of applying market principles from the world of business to public and social organisations such as universities, by prioritising values from the private, for-profit business sector within their management (Lynch, 2014). This sees a more “limited role for the state and a greater role for market forces” within higher education (Stromquist, 2017b, p. 10). Consequently, universities worldwide have seen a steady decline in government funding, producing a climate of “widespread financial austerity” (Altbach, Reisberg, & Rumbley, 2009, p. 68) and further propelling the adoption of business templates. Universities must increasingly generate their own revenue in a higher education landscape “remodelled by marketisation” (Nixon, Scullion, & Hearn, 2018, p. 1).

Marketisation emphasises maximising revenue while decreasing costs. One way to maximise revenue is to expand student enrolments and the income generated through tuition fees; one way to decrease costs is to minimise the amount spent on staff salaries through the adoption of more flexible human resource practices. In the marketised higher education space where students “…most likely view themselves as customers” (Guilbault, 2018, p. 295), universities focus resources on “…logos, brands, slogans, mission statements, and aggressive marketing campaigns” (Barcan, 2016, p. 77) to attract students. It should be noted that expanding student enrolments requires universities to target sections of society for whom a university education was not traditionally an option (Yamada, 2012, p. 83). Online delivery is a highly utilised avenue by which ‘non-traditional’ students access university study (Fırat, 2017) and may offer significant opportunities for students to improve their lives (Stone, O’Shea, May, Delahunty, & Partington, 2016).

To minimise staff costs, universities turn to increasing workloads and accountability for permanent or tenured academic staff, and to expanding the casualisation of academic teaching (Barcan, 2018). As Barcan (2016) states, “the predicaments for casual and tenured academics are distinct yet overlapping; they are mutually implicated” (p. 71). These trends set the scene for an entrepreneurial higher education climate, in which units such as ATU100 operate, and have a particularly
negative impact on casual tutors’ ability to experience equitable and socially just conditions in their places of work.

### 2.2.2 Globalisation of education

Marginson (2010, p. 17) identifies the convergence of aspects of new managerialism in higher education with globalisation. He states that higher education is increasingly positioned as “as a tool of national competition in a globalizing world” (2010, p. 15). Higher education is seen as playing a major role in building the knowledge capacity needed to enable nations to compete within contemporary, deregulated global markets. “Here, the quality of education as compared to other nations is seen as important” (Vingaarg Johansen et al., 2017, p. 271). To build national competitiveness, many governments around the world have policies in place to increase student participation at universities, in line with a global “higher education expansion trend” (Jia & Ericson, 2017, p. 98). This trend deploys marketising tools to transform higher education from elite to mass or universal systems.

Universal higher education also reflects a social commitment that ‘the student body should reflect the diversity of the populations and that the background of students should not have an impact on their participation in and attainment of higher education’ (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2015, p. 19). These commitments to expand higher education play a significant role in enabling nations to build more equitable, inclusive societies in which social justice may be experienced in individual lives (Sen, 2009). Another positive outcome is that expanded student numbers encourage a focus on ensuring quality in teaching and learning and the provision of better academic support (Yamada, 2012, p. 84) which can lift the standard of higher education worldwide.

At the same time, however, universities are themselves participants in global markets via national and international competition between universities. Tightened government funding makes competition for students strenuous. Internationalising the university offering is an important strategy to enhance a university’s competitiveness and increase both domestic and international student enrolments (Yamada, 2012, p. 85). Through globalisation, universities benefit from access to wider global markets to source new enrolments, while at the same time having to compete in this market against other universities (Pucciarelli & Kaplan, 2016, p. 313). Global rankings have emerged as the major tool to formalise comparisons between higher education players and
securing favourable rankings is considered important to enhance reputations and competitiveness. Such rankings have a strong influence on attracting private and public investment (Marginson, 2010, p. 20) and are often featured in universities’ promotional materials (Olcay & Bulu, 2017, p. 153).

While globalisation can facilitate positive international collaboration and knowledge building, it also further intensifies the marketisation and corporatisation of higher education, altering the nature of universities “from a scholarly community to a global business” (Barcan, 2016, p. 76). Globalisation, therefore, propels the culture of new managerialism within higher education, where management decisions may be based more on business principles more than educational and social considerations. It is within this culture that the following three major trends emerge.

2.3 Widening Student Participation

Of particular relevance to this study is the emphasis placed on increasing the participation of students in higher education, particularly those from disadvantaged and low socio-economic backgrounds and considered ‘non-traditional’. In Transforming Australia’s Higher Education System, published in 2009, the Australian government announced a goal for 20% of all undergraduate enrolments to be from low socio-economic status (SES) backgrounds by 2020, with 4% of all funding directed at university teaching to be put towards outreach and retention of disadvantaged students from 2012 onwards (Australian Government, 2009). Despite changes of governments since 2009 and competing priorities, a commitment to widening student participation has so far been maintained (Department of Education and Training, 2017b) along with growth in the numbers of ‘non-traditional’ students.

Trowler (2015, p. 4) criticises an over-generalised use of the term ‘non-traditional’ in much of the literature on widening student participation and states that students are included under this term, “…by virtue of what they are not, rather than by virtue of any essential characteristic they possess in common” (p. 3). Non-traditional students are defined as those who are “…different from the majority” (Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011, p. 33). This may be in terms of age, ethnicity, income, employment status and first-generation (Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011). International students and those from rural locations are commonly added to this list (Meuleman, Garrett, Wrench, & King (2015). The terms ‘disadvantaged’ and ‘underrepresented’ are also widely used in the literature and tend to be more closely applied to specific characteristics.
Disadvantaged student groups are specified in Australian government policies as: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people; people from low SES backgrounds; rural or isolated students, those with mental or physical disabilities, women in non-traditional areas of study, and people from non-English speaking backgrounds (Downing, 2017, p. 20). According to Downing (2017), universities have received significant funding towards programs to improve the access and retention of these students, particularly through the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP) which the government implemented in 2010.

The growth in academic transition units at universities is largely due to the recognition that it can no longer be assumed that students entering university are equipped to succeed in their studies. The challenges presented to universities by “…cohorts of students who are not well prepared for university study” are widely recognised (Probert, 2016, p. 2). Universities are currently under pressure to demonstrate their effectiveness in meeting the needs of these students in measurable ways, such as academic results and completion rates, which are increasingly being linked to performance-based funding (Australian Government, 2009; Harvey, 2017). Academic transition units, such as ATU100, are tasked with: equipping new-to-university students with an understanding of academic skills, conventions and discourses; ensuring students are adept in the use of appropriate academic language; and facilitating their transition into the academic community. This involves an intensive teaching and learning experience with high stakes.

The needs of the students enrolled in ATU100 are compounded by the fact that this is often one of the first units undertaken as they venture into higher education. It is in the first year of university that crucial decisions to persist with study or to withdraw are still undecided (Tinto, 2009, p. 2). This is particularly important for students from disadvantaged backgrounds who may have the most difficulty adjusting to academic life. These are students who are likely to be impacted by their unfamiliarity with university systems and cultures, particularly during their first year, and may “require higher levels of support to succeed, including...greater academic support…” (Bradley et al., 2008, p. 27).

A high proportion of the students enrolled in ATU100 may be categorised as disadvantaged and/or non-traditional, following the above definitions. For many, ATU100 is their first university level unit. They are both new to university and new to
online study. Although Tinto states that "[s]tudent retention is one of the most widely studied areas in higher education" (2007, p.1), relatively little within this body of literature is concerned with the particular needs of students who are non-traditional, new-to-university, and study solely online.

2.3.1 The challenges for non-traditional, new-to-university students in online courses

From the literature, a number of reasons emerge for expecting the experience of ATU100 students to be particularly challenging. Many of the students in the unit are in circumstances where they have important life responsibilities other than their studies competing for their time. Many have been away from study for a number of years. Although not focusing specifically on online students, Wood, Gray-Ganter, & Bailey (2016, p. 24) state that a lack of preparedness for university study, including limited understandings of university life and the demands and requirements of their course, is a primary reason for students to be intimidated and overwhelmed in their first year. These feelings are compounded by the unfamiliarity of both the university and online environments and can lead to loneliness and alienation (Meuleman, Garrett, Wrench, & King, 2015, p. 506).

McInnis & James (2004, p, 42) assert that while universities actively recruit students with family and other external responsibilities and those in full time employment, "...it is still the case that these students are amongst the most likely to withdraw from their studies". They believe that by enrolling non-traditional students, universities are obliged to give them a reasonable chance of success. Much of this obligation is met by additional support services in universities and departments (p.36). However, effectively accessing and utilising this support can be a further challenge for online students.

Adams, Banks, Davis, & Dickson (2010, p. 5) show that belonging to a disadvantaged social group has a significant impact on retention. One factor which could help explain this is the possible students’ self-perception as not belonging at university. When there is a disjunction between the environment and a student's sense of belonging, discomfort arises, and success is likely to depend on the extent to which this discomfort can be reduced (Yorke & Longden, 2004). The concept of *habitus* developed by Bourdieu helps explain this. Bourdieu (1972, p. 72) describes habitus as “…systems of durable, transposable, dispositions” produced by particular environments. Berger
(2000, p. 99) explains that those with access to similar types and amounts of economic and cultural capital share a habitus which “...fosters a common representation of the world in a class-specific manner at a cognitive, taken-for-granted level”. Meuleman et al. (2015, p. 506) suggest that based on their habitus, non-traditional and low SES status students are more likely to feel a sense of incongruity in a higher education environment than traditional students, and that their “…knowledge and capital [are] less valued”. Successful navigation of the university system requires a prior understanding of elite cultural codes, and students who are unfamiliar with these codes find such navigation and consequent academic success difficult to achieve (Yorke and Longden, 2004, p. 81).

Online students may be more affected by this than most since they have no involvement in a physical community. Muldoon & Wijeyewardene (2012) assert that, "...distance students need to be provided with easier access to learning communities, and mentoring within those communities, and hence into the discourse practices of the university community" (p. 4). This captures the rationale behind transition units such as ATU100 when delivered online. Important aspects of this research study involve exploring if and how this is achieved within the unit and developing a deeper understanding of how the students participating in the unit are impacted by and manage challenges relating to retention.

2.3.2 **Sense of community**

Much of the literature on student retention is concerned with the need to foster a sense of community and belongingness for new-to-university students. Vincent Tinto was one of the earliest scholars to identify integration and interaction between the student and other members of the educational institution as being crucial elements of the first year experience, and to make explicit connections between a university's academic and social environment and student retention (Tinto, 1975). However, "[w]hile it may be useful to know that academic and social integration matter, that theoretical insight does not tell practitioners, at least not directly, what they would do to achieve academic and/or social integration in their particular setting" (Tinto, 2007, p. 6).

In an online environment, this is particularly pertinent. Much of the literature on student retention does not mention online students. The greater external commitments of non-traditional students and the unique challenges faced by online students may mean that they do not want or are not able to access social and/or academic engagement with the university community. There may be perceptions that the lot of the online
learner is to study alone (Firat, 2017, p. 183). O’Shea, Stone and Delahunty (2015, p. 54) conclude that some online students have “…a strategic focus on outcomes” that makes feelings of social belonging in their course unimportant to them. This is in contrast to findings which highlight both the importance of lecturer/student interaction (Farr-Wharton, Charles, Keast, Woolcott, & Chamberlain, 2018) and student/student interaction (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2010, p. 7) to retention in online learning spaces. In this context, Blakenship and Atkinson's (2010, p. 50) assertion that "research is inconclusive at this point as to the identification of the critical success factors for effective student learning in online environments” remains a concern.

2.4 Flexible Online Learning

A key aspect in universalising higher education is the move to flexible modes of delivery with many universities scrambling to offer their courses online. According to the most recently available government statistics, in 2017 the portion of fully external students in Australian universities was 14.1% while a further 8.6% were in multi-modal programs, studying through a blend of on-campus and online delivery (Department of Education and Training, 2018a). Taken together, 22.7% of higher education students experienced online study in 2017. This is in comparison to the 2010 figure which was put at 19% (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2012), revealing a growth in the number of students involved in online learning. This growth is also shown when comparing 2016 and 2017 figures. For commencing students, the percentage growth in the number of enrolments was 2.7% for internal students, 3.7% for external students, and 10.2% for those enrolled as multi-modal students (Department of Education and Training, 2018a). This suggests that completing at least some of their degree online is increasingly becoming the norm for Australian university students.

In contrast to on-campus students who mostly study full time, a higher percentage of fully online students study part-time, put at 78.5% in 2010 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2012). This indicates that online students may need to stay in employment to finance their studies and are likely to have other responsibilities and activities competing for their time. Online study is also an attractive alternative for students who suffer other barriers to on-campus attendance, such as those with physical or mental disabilities and who live far from a university campus.

However, online learning also presents some unique challenges. The technological learning curve required for online study may present difficulties for both
students and tutors. Online students are tasked with transitioning into the academic community and acquiring competence in academic skills while using technology which may be unfamiliar and intimidating. The frustration resulting from wrestling with unfamiliar technology plays a significant role in a lack of commitment to online study and student attrition (Kahn, Everington, Kelm, Reid, & Watkins, 2017, p. 204). Online students also report feeling isolated and a sense that they are different and of a lower priority to on-campus students, which has an impact on their engagement with their studies (O’Shea et al., 2015, p. 51). Juggling study with external responsibilities results in some students feeling anxious and overwhelmed in online courses, such as women with family responsibilities (Müller, 2008, p. 7). In general, student self-regulation may be more of a challenge in online learning environments (Kahn et al., 2017, p. 204).

Consequently, academic transition units such as ATU100 are of key importance in promoting the success of new-to-university online students, and effective teaching and engagement of these students is crucial. However, casual tutors may be ill-equipped to transfer their face-to-face teaching practices to the online learning environment without access to the formal support and training this usually entails (Baran & Correia, 2014). These circumstances may have a negative effect on students’ chances of success in higher education and may negate efforts to promote student equity by widening student participation through online channels.

2.4.1 Online pedagogy

Technology has been seen as having the potential to transform student learning and alter the teaching and learning landscape (Warschauer, 2007, p. 42). Through technology, a university education is promoted as being “…open to any student, anywhere and at any time” (Herrington, Schrape, & Singh, 2012, p. iii). According to Garrison, Cleveland-Innes, & Fung (2010, p. 31), the push for online learning “…raises new research questions, particularly about communities of learning and collaborative inquiry and the potential to break new ground pedagogically.”

Despite perceptions of online learning as being isolating, one pedagogical model that is applied to online environments is that of constructivist learning. This model stresses interaction between participants as knowledge is collaboratively constructed, with students actively involved in its production (Svensson, 2011, p. 779). The interactive tools available to online learners are seen to be conducive to collaborative learning, and to have the “…ability to easily bring together diverse communities of
learners” (Costley, 2016, p. 113). Lee and Tsai (2011, p. 908) found that students perceive a better collaborative ability in online compared to face-to-face learning environments.

The Community of Inquiry framework (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2010) of online learning has become the most widely known constructivist online learning model. This model stresses the importance of three kinds of presence in the online learning community which are necessary for deep and significant learning: cognitive presence, social presence and teaching presence. According to Garrison et al. (2010), cognitive presence refers to the extent to which participants are able to construct meaning through sustained communication; social presence refers to the ability of participants to project their personal characteristics into the community; and teaching presence refers to both the design of the educational experience and its facilitation by the tutor.

There is growing evidence that “…teaching presence is a significant determinant of student satisfaction, perceived learning, and sense of community” (Garrison & Arbaugh, 2007, p. 163). Teaching presence in online learning spaces has emerged as key for facilitating the interaction and discourse needed for higher order learning (p. 163). Further, online students’ sense of connectedness was found to be strongly correlated to active teaching presence and guidance (Shea, Sau Li, & Pickett, 2006, p. 185), as was the development of critical thinking (Costley, 2016, p. 146). In the context of online and blended delivery, the lecturer-student relationship is “an often-overlooked, yet potentially crucial, factor in the student engagement and retention debate” (Farr-Wharton et al., 2018, p. 168).

Providing online teachers with the skills specific to facilitating online learning is clearly of importance for the success of students. However, Schreck, Shiflet, Olsen, Meredith and Erp (2010) suggest that there is often a lack of guidance as to what online tutors should actually do. Without adequate professional development, tutors may feel frustrated in their efforts to generate the kind of deep collaboration that has been described as crucial to learning for online students.
2.5 Casualisation of Academic Teaching

Given the above context of increasing student numbers and the recognition of the importance of the teacher in online learning environments, it might be expected that university teaching would currently be a booming and attractive profession. Unfortunately, this is not the case. In recent years, the Australian government has been tightening its higher education funding (Probert, 2016) and increasingly tying this funding to compliance with regulatory reforms, including workforce flexibility (Percy & Beaumont, 2008). Williams and Beovich (2017, p. 1) comment that “[c]asualisation of the academic workforce is a financially attractive option for universities to function under tight fiscal constraints”.

While there has been a rapid increase in both the number and diversity of students, academic staff numbers have not kept pace. As summarised by Ryan, Connell, and Burgess (2017, p. 57), between 1989 and 2013 there was a 218% increase in the number of students enrolled in universities, compared with an 89% increase in the number of full time equivalent academic staff, while “…raw numbers of ‘tenured’ academic staff have barely shifted” (Baré & Bexley, 2017, p. 133). In the same twenty-five year period, the number of tenured academics grew by 53% compared to a 221% growth in casual academic numbers (Ryan, Connell, & Burgess, 2017, p. 58). Baré and Bexley (2017) note that despite initiatives to introduce new classifications of permanent academic positions in which casual staff could be employed, “…the large legacy workforce of casual teaching staff remains” (p. 136). In a regulatory context, Percy and Beaumont (2008, p. 146) propose that “…the casual teacher (is) an important device for demonstrating workplace flexibility”.

This casualisation of teaching in Australian universities is not without its problems. Casual teaching is not the first choice of many academics in this position. In 2003, Junor (p. 285) found that only 28% of causal academics surveyed would choose casual work as their first preference. In a 2010 study involving casual academic tutors, 64% of those surveyed stated they would prefer part time or full time continuing work (Gottschalk & McEachern, 2010, p. 45). Bexley et al. (2011) highlight the prevalent assumption that casual academics are “largely young HDR students supplementing scholarship income” (p. 39). Findings from their large survey of the academic workforce in Australia contradicted this assumption (2011, p. 39) and instead show that less than half of the casual academics surveyed were currently studying (2011, p. 37).
The majority of casual teachers have a strong desire for an academic career although many felt thwarted in this desire. The expectation of casual staff that their positions would transfer into permanent roles was largely unfounded (Gottschalk & McEachern, 2010, p. 48). In fact, Nadolny & Ryan (2015, p. 150) compare the career prospects of casual academics unfavourably with those of casual staff employed at McDonald’s, who are described as having well-structured opportunities for career progression which casual academics lack.

As shown above, the literature related to online learning, student retention and academic success puts emphasis on the important role of the tutor in promoting and facilitating student achievement and engagement. It is of concern then, that the staff situated in this important position experience such limited prospects and conduct their teaching from an apparent position of insecurity and precariousness (Rothengatter & Hil, 2013). This has implications regarding the equitableness of the higher education workplace.

2.5.1 The professional conditions of casual academics

Of significance to the provision of quality of academic teaching is the exclusion of casual staff from meaningful professional development opportunities, involvement in research as part of their professional duties (Nadolny & Ryan, 2015, p. 149), and opportunities for interaction with their academic peers (p. 147). Although most universities provide paid induction for casual staff at the commencement of their employment, there is commonly little to no opportunity for further professional development, including paid opportunities to reflect on their teaching collectively with other teaching staff, or for interaction with other academics (Rothengatter & Hil, 2013). Casual academics are isolated from the networks of permanent staff and are often outside the academic communication loop (Gottschalk & McEachern, 2010, p. 40). Indeed, “[i]t is not unusual for casuals to have no relationships within the university beyond their immediate supervisor and the person who handles their pay” (Lazarfeld Jensen & Morgan, 2009, p. 54). Hitch, Mahoney and Macfarlane (2017, p. 293) note that although casual academic staff see contact with continuing staff as a source of support, in many settings it is limited.

As stated by Rothengatter and Hil (2013, p. 57), at best continuing staff have acquiesced to these employment practices and allowed them to become the norm in their workplaces, and at worst, have been described as treating casual academics “with a
disregard bordering on contempt”. University managers also treat casual academics as secondary and rarely consider their views when making decisions (Chan, 2017, p. 7). The literature is clear in portraying the casual academic as marginalised and isolated. According to Barrett (2004), this amounts to a violation of the psychological contract between universities and casual teaching staff through the emphasis placed the transactional aspect of the relationship over the relational aspect.

Despite being involved in established academic programs which have a predictable student intake through ongoing semesters, casual academics are not guaranteed ongoing employment and are often offered work at the last minute. According to Brown, Goodman, and Yasukawa (2010, p. 172), casual academics are paid on an hourly basis for the time they spend in the classroom, or the equivalent online, and can generally only get work during semesters which they are offered on a take it or leave it basis. Survey results on the typology of casual academics indicate that the majority accumulate full time hours through holding 2-5 different casual or part time positions (Junor, 2003, p. 286). This creates considerable financial strain on casual teachers as well as personal and family stress (Bexley et al., 2011, p. 39).

“Uncertainties about re-engagement breed a sense of vulnerability” (Brown et al., 2010, p. 175) for casual academics. Last minute recruitment practices mean that unit coordinators often need to rely “…personal contacts or word of mouth” when hiring tutors rather than following formal recruitment processes (Williams & Beovich, 2017, p. 1). This can result in a system of patronage which casual academics perceive is open to excessive demands and bullying (Rothengatter & Hil, 2013, p. 55). Yet, despite these adverse conditions, “the risk casualisation poses to the individual worker barely rates a mention in government and university policy and guidelines” (Percy & Beaumont, 2008, p. 147).

A sociological perspective on casualisation highlights the risks to the individuals caught in its cycle (Percy & Beaumont, 2008, p. 147). These risks for casual academics are summarised as: marginalisation; poor working and employment conditions; little recognition or opportunity; and the challenges involved with being placed as “significant, front-end workers” (p.147). Percy and Beaumont (2008, p. 147) problematise the way risk to the quality of teaching and learning is placed within the university context and question the emphasis put on individual training for casual academics as a solution to this risk. They regard the training solution as being too
narrow and one which casts the casual academic as the problem to be fixed (p. 146).

As early as 2000, Knight and Trowler argued that the true risk to quality is the erosion of trust caused by the downward flexibility of university working conditions (2000, p. 110). Percy and Beaumont (2008) argue for holistic professional formation that values the insights of casual academics as those involved in the "most meaningful interactions for learning" (p.153), and includes them within the collegial communities at the universities where they are engaged (p.151). Southall (2017, p. 466) argues that without this, “…universities are missing an opportunity to develop excellent teaching; to benefit and learn from a wealth of experience; and to create insightful and evidence based scholarly outputs from those who often spend the most time with students, and therefore may know them best”. Southall’s comment suggests the value of the contribution casual academics make to the university and raises the question of the extent to which the working conditions they experience in return can be considered equitable and just.
Chapter 3 Methodology

3.1 Research Approach

This study is situated within a qualitative research approach. Qualitative research achieved prominence within educational research in the latter part of the twentieth century. This was in response to the view that quantitative research, which was previously dominant, was not adequately addressing the kinds of questions that are relevant in educational settings (Kervin, Vialle, Herrington, & Okely, 2006, p. 35). While quantitative research is useful for describing broad trends and explaining relationships between variables, qualitative research is appropriate for exploring and understanding central phenomena in complex educational contexts (Creswell, 2008). Qualitative researchers seek to capture and portray complex and changing worlds (Sloan & Bowe, 2014, p. 4). This results in "richer and more varied insights into educational settings than quantitative reports" (Kervin et al., 2006, p. 37).

This often entails utilising an interpretivist approach to research. Liamputtong (2009) asserts that an "...interpretive and flexible approach is necessary because the focus of qualitative research is on meaning and interpretation" (p. x). Creswell (2008, p. 57) supports this, stating that researchers "make an interpretation of the meaning of the data" relative to the aims of the research. Interpretivist researchers aim to reconstruct the self-understandings of research participants, so as to grasp the "...subjective consciousness of intent of the actor from the inside", and to "...get into the head of the actor" (Schwandt, 2000, p. 192) in order to gain deeper insights into the participants’ lived experience. Phenomenology sits within this approach and seeks to describe the essence of people’s experience within an identified phenomenon (Sloan & Bowe, 2014, p. 5). Specifically, hermeneutic phenomenology is “…oriented toward lived experience… and interpreting the ‘texts’ of life…” (Creswell, 2007, p. 59)

A qualitative research approach, utilising interpretivism and phenomenology, is highly suited to this case study. This approach aligns with the first research aim of developing deep and detailed understandings of the experiences of a small number of participants in a particular setting influenced by current higher education trends. In-depth understanding of participants’ experiences was gained through open-ended questionnaires, interviewing and document analysis. Further, Denzin (2017, p. 8) makes a clear link between critical qualitative inquiry and the furthering of social justice through foregrounding the voices of those who may be experiencing inequity. This
aligns with the second research aim of exploring the social justice implications of the conditions that participants in ATU100 experience.

Triangulation is a research strategy that helps promote confidence in the trustworthiness of findings from qualitative research through the use of multiple data sources and methods (Flick, 2004; Creswell, 2007). Three external data sources were utilised to help justify and underpin (Flick, 2004, p. 179) the knowledge gained from the case study in relation to the student and tutor experiences. The data were derived from three externally conducted surveys related to the unit. Further, quasi-statistical analyses, involving “simple counts of things” (Maxwell, 2010, p. 476), were used as an additional research method. The use of numerical data did not detract from the qualitative research approach employed for this case study since, as Maxwell argues, “…numbers…are a legitimate and important sort of data for qualitative researchers” (p. 478) and were here used for the purpose of triangulation. These strategies are detailed more fully in the research instruments and data sources section below.

3.1.1 Personal Background to Research Approach

As stated in Section 1.2 above, I have been involved in ATU100, the unit that is the focus of this study, as a casual academic. It was my experience in the unit that prompted an interest in conducting this research. However, I felt concerned that my personal closeness to the study might result in over-subjectivity. This concern led to exploring methodologies to not only manage this aspect but to support the place of researcher subjectivity within the qualitative research approach.

There are differing views as to the extent to which it is possible to gain insight into participants’ lived experiences from an objective researcher standpoint. Some argue that researchers are able to understand the subjective meaning of another person’s action while themselves maintaining an objective viewpoint (Schwandt, 2000, p. 193), and that by ‘bracketing’ or excluding the outer world together with their own individual biases, researchers may achieve contact with the essential phenomena of a study (Laverty, 2003, p. 23). Hermeneutic phenomenology, however, takes a non-objectivist view of meaning, noting that meaning is not something external that can be discovered but is rather mutually negotiated in the act of interpretation (Schwandt, 2000, p. 195). In this view, there are no methods entirely objective and free of the values of the researcher (Laverty, 2003, p. 25) as all people operate within their own socio-historically inherited traditions (Sloan & Bowe, 2014, p. 7) and biases. As researchers, we must reach
understanding through our own biases by risking and examining them and allowing our subjective positions to play a positive role in the search for meaning (Laverty, 2003, p. 25). Further, it is important to accept our implicit assumptions and make them explicit within our research (Kafle, 2013), which I attempt to do in the following paragraph.

I came to this research with my own personal experiences as a casual academic and of the working conditions that this status entails. I came with observations of the management practices within the university in which I worked, memories of conversations with my fellow tutors and communication with students, and anecdotal knowledge of students staying or leaving during my time teaching the unit. These experiences gave me an empathetic lens with which to view the case. My perception of the case was also influenced by my own family and societal background and personal experiences as a student. Coming from a lower socio-economic status family, I entered a prestigious university as a school leaver. While I did well academically, I struggled to cope socially and emotionally which led me to drop out of my course. Subsequently, I stopped and started my studies at various universities at various points of my life, until finally persevering to complete two degrees through online learning.

The closeness of my own personal experiences to those of the participants in the unit created a strong feeling of connection. This predisposed me to view the case study in a particular way, and to ask particular kinds of research questions. These were questions about whether the people I was interacting with in the unit were experiencing a learning and/or working environment which could be described as just. I felt that it was important to gain more understanding of what online students and casual academics experienced in their daily interactions within higher education to begin to answer these questions.

In view of this, the contextualisation of the place of subjectivity in research found in hermeneutic phenomenology helped alleviate the concerns I had and provided justification regarding my personal closeness to the research. This research attempts to gain a complex view of the unit by acknowledging the subjectivity of my own position and seeking an understanding of the positions of others in the unit. I have allowed my closeness to the participants’ experiences to play a positive role by building on the rapport and trust gained through shared experience. This trust enabled research participants to open up through the research process, allowing deeper insights. The shared experience also enhanced participants’ enthusiasm for being involved in the case
study, as there was a feeling that we were ‘in this together’. However, to manage the possibility of over-subjectivity, this research had a strong emphasis on triangulation using “understandings derived from other sources” (Creswell, 2007, p. 206). I drew on external sources of data to support the understandings gained from the participants, as outlined above. I also engaged my findings with a substantial reading of the literature and existing theories (Urquhart & Fernández, 2016). These and other strategies for ensuring trustworthiness and authenticity are discussed in more detail in the Section 3.3.7 below.

3.2 Research Methods

3.2.1 Case study research

As this research closely examines the experiences of participants in one teaching and learning site, it falls within the category of case study research. Case study research is a form of qualitative research which "focuses from the beginning on a specific person, place or thing" (Kervin et al., 2006, p. 70) and is grounded in real life contemporary events (Liamputtong, 2009, p. 190). Creswell (2008) describes a case study as being "...an in-depth exploration of a bounded system...based on extensive data collection (p. 476). Kervin et al. (2006, p. 70 ) agree that a rigorous case study is one that utilises multiple types of data collection sources, such as documentation, interviews and artefacts.

Case study research methods are well suited to this study. A qualitative case study can be conducted with a small number of participants (Lazar, Feng, & Hochheiser, 2010, p. 372) as it "...rests implicitly on the existence of a micro-macro link in social behaviour" (Gerring, 2007, p. 1). This ties in closely to the aim of developing an in-depth understanding of ATU100 as a micro illustration of macro-level trends in higher education. Through developing understanding of the experiences of a small group of research participants, and by linking these experiences with related external data sources and the literature, I have illustrated my concerns about the impact of macro-level trends on those placed on the edge of academe.

This aim is consistent with what is termed an instrumental case study, in which the case "...plays a supportive role and...facilitates our understanding of something else" (Stake, 2008, p. 123). The case serves the purpose of illuminating understanding of a particular concern (Creswell, 2008, p. 476) and may be generalisable to theory
Stake (2005, p. 445) explains that unlike intrinsic case studies where research is undertaken because of a particular interest in the case itself, an instrumental case study is conducted primarily to advance understanding of an external interest. While the case is scrutinised with depth and detail, it has a simultaneous interest in the particular and the general, with the overall purpose being to provide insight into a wider issue (Stake, 2005, p. 445). The issue here is the influence of contemporary trends on the experience of students and tutors at the periphery of higher education.

### 3.2.2 Constructivist grounded theory method

A wide range of approaches to data analysis are mentioned in case study research. Stake (2005, p. 443) emphasises that case study research is defined by the researcher’s interest in the case, not by the research methods used. This study has been guided by constructivist grounded theory method (GTM) due to the place this method affords to subjectivity, which sits well within the methodological approaches outlined above. There is an acknowledgment in constructivist GTM that the backgrounds and contexts of both the researcher and research participants affect all stages of the research process (Mruck and Mey, 2007, p. 519).

Grounded theory method was developed in 1967 by sociologists Glasser and Strauss and was originally situated in the objectivist tradition of "robust data, accuracy and neutral observations..." (Liamputtong, 2009, p. 209). More recently, Charmaz developed a constructivist approach (Creswell, 2008, p. 439) as a response to post-modernist criticisms of grounded theory as being based on “positivistic premises” (Charmaz, 2000, p. 510). In line with the non-objectivist view of hermeneutic phenomenology, Charmaz states that "...what observers see and hear depends on their prior interpretive frames, biographies, and interests as well as the research context, their relationships with research participants, concrete field experiences, and modes of generating and recording empirical materials" (Charmaz, 2005, p. 509). In her model, Charmaz proposes that theory is not discovered, but rather 'constructed' from the empirical research (Charmaz, 2006, p. 113).

According to Kelle (2007, p. 196), earlier versions of GTM encouraged researchers to avoid contact with existing literature prior to a study so as to enter the field with an objective mind free of pre-conceptions. However, Urquhart and Fernández (2016, p. 133) call this idea “a particularly pervasive misconception” about GTM. More
recent versions of the method, including constructivist GTM, support the use of a literature review prior to beginning the research (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007, p. 20). This is to gain understanding of the conversation the researcher is entering into and to define the parameters of this conversation, rather than to define the research itself (p. 20). Urquhart and Fernández (2016) argue that the theoretical sensitivity required in GMT research can only be gained from prior knowledge of extant literature and that research results must also be engaged with the literature (pp. 133-134).

Schram (2003) states "[t]he explicit aim of grounded theory is to develop a substantive theory that is derived from or grounded in the data..." (p.100). In other words, theory is directly generated from the data, and is responsive to change as new data emerge. While a substantive theory did not emerge as the outcome of this case study, as discussed below, the research findings were grounded in the data and were responsive to them throughout the research process in line with constructivist GTM.

Charmaz stresses the need for researchers to use flexible strategies to gain understanding of the meanings that research participants ascribe to the situations under study (Creswell, 2008, p. 433). She makes it clear that the procedures outlined for conducting constructivist GTM do not need to be “formulaic prescriptions” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 3) and that the generation of a theory may not always be the end point (p. 16). Rather, researchers are able to adopt and adapt elements of constructivist GTM to suit diverse studies and combine these elements with other methods for analysing data according to purpose. Charmaz proposes that constructivist grounded theory “…highlights the flexibility of the method and resists mechanical applications of it” (2014, p. 13) and “…can complement other approaches to qualitative data analysis, rather than stand in opposition to them” (p. 16).

In response to the data that emerged through the study, thematic analysis was included in the research process as the main analytical tool. It became clear that generating an end theory was too narrow an outcome for this study, taking into consideration the breadth of focus on three major trends in higher education. Rather, the end point is a collection of themes which allow the experiences of the research participants to be understood in greater depth (Vaismoradi, Jones, Turunen, & Snelgrove, 2016) and which connect their experiences with the wider higher education context. As with case study research, the qualitative data used in grounded theory method can take many forms such as observations, conversations, interviews, public
records, and the researcher's own personal reflections (Charmaz, 2000). The extent of data needed and the methods used for its collection may not be precisely known prior to commencing the study. Adaptability in the research process is emphasised in order to respond to different needs as they emerge from the research.

The two elements of grounded theory method that this study utilises are *initial sampling* and *emerging design*. Initial sampling is used to address the initial research questions in order to start the process of establishing early categories and refining the research design, according to established sampling criteria (Charmaz, 2014, p. 197). It provides a “…point of departure…” (p. 197) from which the researcher can then make informed decisions about the subsequent direction of the research. Emerging design refers to a process by which the researcher collects data, immediately analyses it, and makes decisions about what data to collect next (Creswell, 2008, p. 442). According to Bryant and Charmaz (2007, p. 1) “…grounded theory research encourages researchers to persistently interact with their data, and at the same time remain constantly involved with the emerging analysis”. The researcher is open to being led by the data throughout the research process. These grounded theory elements provided the starting point, and guided the subsequent research processes within this case study.

### 3.3 Research Design

The design of the case study centred on in-depth interviewing, open-ended questionnaires and document analysis, to build up a rich and complex picture of the participants’ experiences. Permissions were also gained to use external data sources related to the study. These were used for triangulation purposes and to contextualise and suggest a wider applicability of the participants’ accounts of their experiences. Further details of external sources and their relationship to the case study can be found in Section 3.2 below.

#### 3.3.1 Research participants

The tutors and students who participated in the research were involved in ATU100 in one or more Open Universities Australia (OUA) study periods across 2013 to 2016. Potential research participants were contacted after the close of six different study periods across this timeframe.

- **Students**: The student participants were recruited from those who had enrolled in one of the six study periods. Emails containing information about the research, a
qualitative questionnaire (see Appendix C.1), and consent forms were sent out to invite students to participate. Students who chose to participate in the study first completed the questionnaire and returned this via email along with an indication of whether they agreed to be contacted further to arrange an interview. Students were also invited to participate in a follow-up questionnaire (see Appendix C.3), and asked if they would permit their reflective journals, which were submitted for assessment during the unit, to be used in the research as extant documents. These instruments provided both a look forward to a timeframe beyond the initial research, and a look back to participants’ initial involvement in the unit as enrolled students.

Across the case study, there was an overall number of 12 student participants with eight interviewees. 11 students were female with only one male participant who was sought out by the researcher. Similarly, 11 of the students were mature-age with only one school-leaver participant who, again, was sought out by the researcher to provide a wider perspective regarding the student experience.

Therefore, the majority of the students who participated in the research were mature-age females. Seven students indicated an annual income of below $40,000 per year, two students’ incomes were below $60,000 per year, and one student gave an income of over $100,000. These amounts are in Australian dollars and may be compared to the minimum wage in Australia of $37,398 (Fairwork Ombudsman, 2018). Ten of the students indicated they were new to university when they enrolled in ATU100. Four students lived in rural or remote locations, and six students indicated they had a physical or mental health condition. Not all students provided full details on these demographic aspects, but from the information students provided, it can be seen that the majority are non-traditional in at least one aspect.

• Tutors: The tutor participants were all casual academics who had taught in ATU100 at some point across the six study periods. Not all tutors taught in every study period in the unit. For ethical reasons, it was important that tutors did not feel a conflict of interest between their participation in the research and their work with their students, their professional and personal relationship to the researcher, or their ongoing employment. Therefore, only tutors who were not teaching in a current study period were invited to participate in the research and their participation was strictly confidential. Tutors were emailed invitations to be involved in the research as interview participants. The email contained
information about the study, a consent form and a list of pre-interview questions (see Appendix C.2) which were used as a basis for the semi-structured interviews. Six tutors agreed to be interviewed, with one further tutor participating through written responses to the emailed questions. Later in the case study, member checking was conducted by sending the seven tutors a list of statements derived from the themes and related codes that had emerged from their initial interviews, to which they responded on two difference scales (see Appendix C.4).

Of the seven tutor participants, there were four females and three males. All were experienced teachers. Four tutors had taught in ATU100 for up to two study periods, while three were long-term tutors in the unit with involvement covering a number of years. All of the tutors also taught other units and six taught at other universities. Five of the tutors also taught classes on-campus with two tutors teaching solely online. Five of the tutors were seeking a full-time workload and income, while two tutors wanted a part-time load. The following table shows the students and tutors who participated in the case study (real names are not used).

Table 3-1: Research participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Students</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Age Group</th>
<th>Income Bracket</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Time away from study</th>
<th>Reason for choosing to study online</th>
<th>Non-traditional</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Students</td>
<td>Moira</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>46-55</td>
<td>20,000-40,000</td>
<td>Major metro</td>
<td>9 years</td>
<td>Requires ongoing medical treatment</td>
<td>Yes – Disability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Melissa</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>46-55</td>
<td>20,000-40,000</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>22 years</td>
<td>Rural location and family commitments</td>
<td>Yes – Rural Low SES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Amanda</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>26-35</td>
<td>Not given</td>
<td>Major metro</td>
<td>15 years</td>
<td>Disability (bipolar disease) and single mother</td>
<td>Yes – Disability</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Louise  F  56-65  Above 100,000  Major metro  20 years  Carer for husband and two children with disabilities
Ayla  F  66-75  20,000-40,000  Rural  40 years  Too far from nearest university to commute Displaced single mother and two of her children have disability
Joanna  F  36-45  41,000-60,000  Major metro  20 years  Disabled single mother and two of her children have disability
Elise  F  46-55  20,000-40,000  Major metro  17 years  Bedridden with degenerative disease
Christiana  F  18-25  20,000-40,000  Remote  School leaver  Remote location/primary carer for disabled mother/ suffers from ill health
Daniel  M  26-35  41,000-60,000  Major metro  11 years  In full time employment
Lina  F  46-55  Not given  Remote  5 years  Remote location
Georgina  F  Not given  Not given  12 years  Not given
Janelle  F  26-35  20,000-40,000  Major metro  6 years  Work and parenting

Tutors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Extent of involvement in unit</th>
<th>Teach other units</th>
<th>Online/ on-campus</th>
<th>Full-time/part-time</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kristy</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Long-term – multiple years</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Both</td>
<td>Full-time</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Cody   M   Short-term – up to 2 study periods  Yes  Both  Full-time
Lily   F   Long-term – multiple years  Yes  Online only  Part-time
Bruno   M   Short-term – up to 2 study periods  Yes  Both  Full-time
Michelle  F   Short-term – up to 2 study periods  Yes  Online only  Part-time
Lydia  F   Long-term – multiple years  Yes  Online only  Part-time
Eddie   M   Short-term – up to 2 study periods  Yes  Both  Full-time

3.3.2 Research instruments and data sources

Several types of research instruments and data sources were used throughout the case study to inform the findings that are more fully discussed in the articles which make up Chapters 4, 5 and 6. These were not used in a linear fashion, but were returned to throughout the study in an iterative process as analysis revealed the need for further data to better address the purpose of each phase and/or to respond to the specific research questions for each article. This is consistent with a flexible, emerging design.

The following table gives a brief outline of each instrument/data source which are described in detail immediately below. The number of participants column indicates how many of the overall total of 19 research participants were involved in each phase.

**Table 3-2: Overview of research phases**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Purpose</th>
<th>Instrument or data source</th>
<th>Number of participants</th>
<th>Method of analysis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>•Gather demographic information</td>
<td>▪Student Pre-Interview survey</td>
<td>10 students</td>
<td>Thematic analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>•Ascertain extent of each student’s agreement with statements based on the literature</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>•Gather written responses to interview</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student interviews</td>
<td>•Gather data on participants’ experiences in online learning, reasons for studying online, and perceptions on what helped or hindered them</td>
<td>•Semi-structured interviews conducted online</td>
<td>8 students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher interviews</td>
<td>•Gather data on participants’ experiences of teaching online and their perceptions of working as casual academics</td>
<td>•Semi-structured interviews conducted face-to-face, online or in writing</td>
<td>7 tutors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Follow-up questionnaires</td>
<td>•Check how participants perceived the accuracy of emerging themes derived from interviews, questionnaires and reflective journals •Ascertain whether participants’ experiences had changed or remained the same over time</td>
<td>•Student Follow-up Questions •Tutor Follow-up Questions</td>
<td>6 students &amp; 7 tutors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students’ reflective journals</td>
<td>•Gain ‘real time’ insight into students’ perceptions written when they were studying the unit</td>
<td>•Reflective Journal submitted for assessment in the unit</td>
<td>7 students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>External data sources</td>
<td>•Triangulate the empirical data gathered from the research phases above</td>
<td>•Unit online learning site •Online Learner Engagement Survey* •Your Voice Sessional Staff Satisfaction</td>
<td>509 students •126 students •353 tutors</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
• **Student pre-interview questionnaire**: The questionnaire consisted of three sections, one on demographic information, the second made up of ten statements to which students indicated the extent of their agreement, and a third section with ten open-ended questions to which students could write up to a paragraph in response (see Appendix C.1). The statements and questions were developed by the researcher and were informed by potential issues that were identified through the literature, anecdotal evidence from the teaching and learning sites, and informal information relayed about students’ experiences in ATU100 through email correspondence as part of the regular learning and teaching during active study periods. Questions were related to the effectiveness of the unit and its online delivery, perceptions of tutor involvement in the learning site, and students’ feelings of belonging and connectedness to the learning community and the university. Ten students completed the pre-interview questionnaire.

• **Student interviews**: Interviews lasted between 45-65 minutes and were conducted online using a video conferencing website, and recorded. Using a semi-structured format, students were asked to elaborate on their questionnaire responses to provide a more complex and nuanced understanding. The familiarity of the researcher with the students’ learning spaces and the focus unit put the interviewees at ease as there was a sense that the discussion was about a shared experience. The semi-structured interview format also provided students with the opportunity to bring in other experiences and perspectives that they felt comfortable with sharing, allowing them to contribute their voices to the research in a significant way. A total of eight students agreed to be interviewed online. A further three students contributed interview responses via the questionnaire above. One student emailed a one paragraph response to the interview questions, but declined further participation.

• **Tutor interviews**: Six of the seven tutor participants agreed to be interviewed. One tutor participated in the study through written responses to these questions. The live interviews were conducted face to face and were audio recorded. A list of pre-interview questions (see Appendix C.2) was sent out in order to give the
Interviewees time to prepare and think about their own experiences and positions in relation to the questions. The questions were based on insights gained from the literature, informal observations of the work environment, and personal experience. They centred around tutors’ experiences of online teaching, their working conditions as casual academics, and their involvement in developmental and collegial aspects of academic work, or lack thereof. The duration of each interview was approximately 50 – 90 minutes and followed a semi-structured format.

For ethical reasons, interviews were conducted during study periods in which they were not teaching the unit, within the active research period from 2014 to 2016, to alleviate concerns of a possible conflict of interest between their participation in the research and their interaction with current ATU100 students and colleagues. All the tutors were known to the researcher so there was again a sense of talking about a shared experience. However, interview questions (Appendix C.2) were neutral in tone to allow participants own insights and experiences to emerge during the interview and avoid ‘leading’. Tutors were comfortable and seemed eager to ‘have their say’ in communicating with the researcher. It is interesting to note that all of the tutor participants checked that their anonymity was assured before commencing participation even though this information was given in the initial email about the study. The sense that tutors felt unable to talk about their experiences more widely indicates that the opportunity to have their voices heard through these interviews was a valuable one.

- **Student follow-up questionnaire:** All participating students were sent a follow-up questionnaire (see Appendix C.3) which had two main aims: firstly, to present the findings that had emerged up to that point of the case study and give students an opportunity to assess how accurately these aligned with the experiences they had reported; and secondly, to ascertain how consistent their experiences had been moving forward. The first section of the questionnaire consisted of some emerging themes developed from their interview responses, to which students were asked to express the extent of their agreement on a five-point scale. The second section contained questions centred on their continuing experiences with online study to which students could provide written responses. Six students completed the follow-up questionnaire.

- **Tutor follow-up questionnaire:** The tutor follow-up questionnaire (see Appendix
C) was designed to ascertain the extent to which the tutor participants agreed with the researcher’s articulation of the research findings that emerged from their interviews, acting as a confirmatory process. The first section presented the themes relating to the tutor experience that had been derived so far in the study, to which tutors indicated the extent of their agreement on a five-point scale. The second section consisted of lists of the categories from which the themes had been developed, grouped under each of the themes. Tutors were asked to respond using a yes/no/unsure scale. The tutor follow-up questionnaire provided valuable information to the researcher regarding the accuracy with which the tutor voice was being represented in the findings from the study.

- **Student reflective assignment**: Eight of the 12 participating students gave permission for their Reflective Journals, competed as an assessment during the unit, to be analysed. Two of the questions that students were asked to reflect on in the assessment related to their experiences of becoming university students and the learning they achieved through the unit. Their responses to these questions provided valuable ‘real time’ insights into how they perceived their learning experiences at the time they were studying in the unit. This augmented the data obtained from responses to the pre-questionnaire and the interviews, in which they participated some months after finishing ATU100.

- **Unit Online Learning site**: A quasi-statistical analysis of the ATU100 online Learning Management Site (LMS) for one study period was included in the study. This was in response to the positive findings about the student experience that were emerging in the initial sample, compared with negative anecdotal evidence of a very high rate attrition from the unit. The analysis looked at numbers of students who: never logged in to the LMS but remained enrolled, did not submit any assignments, withdrew from the unit, completed the unit, and passed the unit.

- **National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education (NCSEHE) Online Learner Engagement Survey**: Permission was obtained from NCSEHE to allow access to the data from the Online Learner Engagement survey by means of a formal shared research agreement and an amendment added to the NCSEHE ethics approval. The Online Learner Engagement Survey was a large scale survey consisting of quantitative and qualitative sections which was conducted online by NCSEHE across 2014 – 2015. Links to the survey were sent to all online students studying at the university which offers the focus unit. The
responses from 126 students who were or had previously been enrolled in ATU100 were extracted from the quantitative section of the survey. These responses consisted of information on students’ demographic characteristics, students’ commitments outside of study, educational attainment, their time away from study, and whether they were the first in their family to attend university. This was to ascertain whether the characteristics and circumstances of the three students in the initial sample were similar to those reported by the larger number of students who responded to the NCSEHE survey.

- Your Voice Sessional Staff Satisfaction Survey: Permission to use the extant finding from the Your Voice Sessional Staff Satisfaction Survey was obtained by email from the university which delivers the unit. This survey was conducted by an external organisation on behalf of the university and sought responses from all casual Humanities teaching staff, of which 353 responded. This was a quantitative survey which consisted of a series of statements to which respondents indicated the extent of their agreement or disagreement on a Likert scale. The responses were quantified and expressed as percentages. The sections of interest to the researcher were those which related to working conditions including pay, recognition and workload, professional and career opportunities, and fairness and equity. The findings outlined in these sections were compared with the experiences related by the tutor participants to identify to what extent these were more widely shared. The survey findings directly relate to the experiences of the research participants as they concern staff who work in the same faculty within the university that delivers the unit and under the same employment conditions, pay structures, and overall management policies and practices.

- ATU100 Student Unit Evaluation Survey: Permission to utilise extant findings from the official Student Unit Evaluation Surveys for the unit was obtained by email from the major unit coordinator. Student unit evaluation surveys are conducted by the university at the close of each study period. Eight surveys covering 2015-2016 and involving 640 students were utilised for this case study. The surveys included quantitative and qualitative sections. Extant findings regarding the percentage of students’ agreement with statements about teaching and learning in the unit were taken from the quantitative sections. The qualitative sections, which consisted of two open-ended questions, were analysed for the number and types of comments relating to aspects of teaching.
and learning. The major focus was on the frequency of comments relating to tutors in the unit and the types of words used in the comments. The surveys provided insights into students’ perceptions of their teachers. Findings from the survey were used to extend and reinforce those that had emerged previously in the research which showed students had positive perceptions of tutors in the unit.

### 3.3.3 Research sites

As the unit is delivered online, the student participants reside in different parts of Australia. Therefore, communication with students through the research phases was carried out electronically. Communication with tutors was on campus as well as electronic. University and private email accounts were important sites for disseminating information about the research, recruiting participants, and communicating, particularly with those participants who did not consent to be interviewed. Interviews with all consenting students and one tutor were conducted using online video conferencing sites, specifically zoom.us. Five tutors were interviewed in person at a location convenient to them on the campus of the university which delivers ATU100 and at one other university campus. Both online and face-to-face interviews were recorded and transcribed. Some research participants did not consent to be interviewed. These participants contributed to the study through emailed questionnaires and interview questions, or through direct email communication. Aspects of the study were facilitated through access to the unit’s online Learning Management Site (LMS) where the teaching and learning for the unit took place, including the assessments area, or Grade Centre, and electronically submitted assignments.

### 3.3.4 Research procedure

The case study involved three major phases. These were tightly linked to the three articles included in this thesis and each involved a number of the research instruments/data sources listed above. Data were continuously analysed to inform subsequent research steps and any new types of data needed. Decisions regarding the need for further data or different types of data were made in response to the emerging themes.

Phase 1 consisted of *initial sampling* which addressed the initial research questions to begin refining the research design and establishing early categories. According to Charmaz (2014, p. 197), initial sampling involves establishing relevant
sampling criteria and choosing participants who fit the criteria. Three students and three tutors were included in this phase and the findings are presented in article 1. Phase 2 focused on students and was designed to further explore findings from phase 1 which indicated that positive experiences were gained from online study which could contribute to social justice in students’ lives. In this phase, the number of student participants was increased to 12. Findings are presented in article 2. Phase 3 of the case study, presented in article 3, had a focus on tutors and was designed to further explore findings from phase 1 which indicated that online students highly appreciated their tutors, but tutors’ professional experiences were largely negative. A further four tutors participated in this phase of the research. Through the three phases, the emerging design of the research is apparent.

The case study received human research ethics approval, amendment approvals, survey approvals and permissions across two universities. Below is a summary of the research procedures involved in each phase as carried out chronologically over the duration of the case study.

Table 2-3: Research phases

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phase 1</th>
<th>Initial sample</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• 3 tutors who were chosen because they were not tutoring the focus unit at the time the research was conducted. This was a response to the ethical concern of a conflict of interest between participation in the research and interaction with current ATU100 students and colleagues.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• 3 students who had completed the unit previously and were chosen as a response to the literature which indicated of the importance of perseverance and tutor support to retention. All three students had expressed doubts to their tutor about their academic ability at a mid-point in their study periods, but subsequently completed the unit successfully.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student information and questionnaires</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• The 3 students were emailed an invitation to participate in the research, an information letter and a pre-interview questionnaire. The questionnaire elicited students’ demographic characteristics and the extent of their agreement to statements about online learning, and included the questions on which an interview would be based. This was designed to take no more than 30 minutes to complete.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student interviews</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Semi-structured interviews of 45-65 minutes duration were conducted with the 3 students via online video conferencing, and recorded.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Tutor information and interviews

- The 3 tutors were emailed an invitation to participate in the research, an information letter and a copy of the questions on which an interview would be based. Face-to-face, semi-structured interviews of 45-65 minutes duration were conducted with the 3 tutors and recorded.

Triangulation with external data sources

- A Quasi-statistical analysis of the ATU100 online Learning Site for one study period was conducted regarding rates of student participation, completion, withdrawal, assignment submission, and grades.
- Findings taken from the Online Learner Engagement Survey conducted by the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education (NCSEHE) were used to contextualise the experiences of the 3 students amongst the wider cohort.
- Findings taken from Your Voice Sessional Staff Satisfaction Survey were used to contextualise the experiences of the 3 tutors in relation to their colleagues within the Faculty of Humanities at the same university.

### Phase 2 Sample

- 12 students including the 3 students from the initial sample.

Student information and questionnaires

- At the close of three study periods across 2015 to 2016, approximately 370 students who had been enrolled in the unit were emailed an invitation to participate in the research, an information letter and the pre-interview questionnaire, resulting in 9 further students agreeing to participate.

Student interviews

- Semi-structured interviews of 45-65 minutes duration were conducted via online video conferencing with 4 of the 9 further participants, and recorded. 4 students sent written responses to each of the interview questions, while 1 student emailed a paragraph response.

Follow-up questionnaires

- All 12 students were emailed a follow-up questionnaires, which 6 students completed. These were designed to ascertain the extent to which student participants agreed with the emerging themes derived from their interviews, and how consistent their online learning experiences had been over time.

Reflective journals

- 8 of the 12 students gave permission for their reflective journals, which had been completed as an assessment for the unit, to be analysed. This was to look back in time and gain insight into the perceptions that students had of the unit and their experience of online learning at the time of their enrolment in ATU100.

### Phase 3 Sample

- 7 tutors including the 3 tutors from the initial sample

Tutor interviews

- 4 further tutor participants were emailed an invitation to participate in the research, an information letter and a copy of the
questions on which an interview would be based. Face-to-face semi-structured interviews of 45-90 minutes duration were conducted with 3 of these tutors and recorded. 1 tutor sent written responses to each of the interview questions.

Follow-up questionnaires 5 tutors completed follow-up questionnaires which were designed to ascertain the extent to which they agreed with the themes that had been derived from the tutor interviews.

Triangulation with external data source Quasi-statistical analysis of findings taken from unit evaluation surveys conducted by the university covering 8 study periods across 2015-2016 and involving 640 students. This was to underpin findings from phase 1 regarding the high regard student participants had for their tutors by ascertaining the extent to which this view was more widely held. This information was contrasted with the professional conditions reported by the tutors.

3.3.5 Data analysis

Constructivist grounded theory method (GTM) provided the foundation for the research design of this study. In GMT, data are analysed close to the time of collection, with the analysis then informing subsequent data collection and the direction of the research (Charmaz, 2014). Further, the methods for data analysis within constructivist GTM are not prescriptive but, rather, different approaches are able to complement each other (Charmaz, 2014, p. 16). This supported the decision to adopt a different form of data analysis. After data collection in the first phase of the research, it was decided that thematic analysis would be a better fit for the research. This is because it became clear that theory development would not be the outcome for the case study due to the breadth of focus created by examining three major trends and having two sets of participants.

Thematic analysis is described as “…the search for and identification of common threads that extend throughout a set of data” (Kehrwald, 2008, p. 93). A theme may be considered “…a thread of underlying meaning implicitly discovered at the interpretive level…” (Vaismoradi et al., 2016, p. 101). Theme development follows on from the identification of categories which are “…directly expressed in the text…” (p. 102) and imparts these categories with greater depth of meaning through more abstract conceptualisation (Vaismoradi et al., 2016).

A process of thematic analysis was used for all data directly collected by the researcher. As a first step, all research participants were assigned a pseudonym to ensure their anonymity, and the list of names was saved under password in the
researcher’s secure cloud storage account. Interviews were transcribed verbatim by the researcher to form written texts which were put together with the written data derived from questionnaires, reflective assignments and email contents to establish the body of raw data from the research. In an iterative process throughout the case study, these written texts were analysed to identify common categories which were subsequently developed into the themes that formed the basis for the findings presented in the three articles.

Through the different research phases, sections of the texts which showed commonality were highlighted as direct quotes. These quotes were extracted, assigned categories and inserted into two separate tables, one for student data and one for tutor data. Additional quotes were identified as further data became available. These were either matched with existing categories, or new categories were added to the tables as relevant (See Appendix B.3). Categories which were similar in terms of topic and/or experiences described were then combined and rendered as more abstract conceptualisations to develop a collection of themes as the end product of the research (Appendix B.2 and B.2). Thus, these themes derive directly from the experiences of the research participations expressed in their own voices and are the major outcome of the case study as they informed the three articles herein.

In addition to data collected directly, permission was gained to use four external data sources, namely: ATU100 online Learning Management Site (LMS); Online Learner Engagement Survey; Your Voice Sessional Staff Satisfaction Survey; and ATU100 Unit Evaluation Surveys. Extant findings from these sources were linked to the categories and themes which were developed from the raw data. In addition, quasi-statistical analyses were conducted on the ATU100 Online Learning Site and the ATU Unit Evaluation Surveys. Maxwell (2010, p. 476) defines quasi-statistical analysis as simple counts of things used to help extract meaning, support interpretation and express research claims more precisely. This analysis of the Learning Site focused on numbers pertaining to student retention, attrition and grades, while the Evaluation Surveys analysis focused on the numbers of comments pertaining to teaching in the unit. The themes from the case study were also related to concepts and theories reported in the literature about student equity and social justice, the role of online tutors, conditions experienced by casual academics and global trends in higher education. These external data sources and the literature were used for triangulation purposes.
3.3.6 Trustworthiness and authenticity

Qualitative research and its contribution to understanding has faced significant criticism. Over the decades it has variously been characterised as weak, unscientific, subjective, and lacking in rigour (Johnson & Rasulova, 2017, p. 265). Subjective, interpretive and constructivist ideas in the qualitative research process “…stand in sharp contrast to standard epistemological accounts of establishing the objectivity and truthfulness of the claims we make about the world…” (Schwandt, Lincoln, & Guba, 2007, p. 12). Therefore, the standard criteria may be “…inappropriate, or even irrelevant…” (p. 18) when applied to qualitative/interpretive studies.

Lincoln and Guba have been at the forefront of addressing these criticisms and have offered a formal set of criteria which can be used demonstrate the robustness of qualitative research studies (Johnson & Rasulova, 2017, p. 266). These criteria guide researchers to ensure the trustworthiness and authenticity of their research. Criteria to demonstrate trustworthiness are: credibility, relating to confidence in the ‘truth’ of the findings according to the research subjects in the particular research context; confirmability, relating to ensuring the findings substantially represent the research subjects rather than the researcher’s bias; dependability, relating to consistency in documenting data, methods, and research decisions and interpretations; and transferability, relating to sufficiency in the detail and depth of the researcher’s description of the study to allow a reader to draw similarities with other contexts (Johnson & Rasulova, 2017).

These criteria received some criticism, however, as they were thought to largely parallel positivist constructions. The idea of authenticity was introduced by Lincoln and Guba as a way to evaluate qualitative research on its own terms (Schwandt et al., 2007). Authenticity relates to ensuring that the research is fair to participants, and can, in some measure, contribute to transformation within their lives and/or the society in which they live. As Lincoln and Guba state, “…all stakeholders should be empowered in some fashion…” (Schwandt et al., 2007, p. 20). Building on this, Denzin (2017, p. 8) emphasises the links between qualitative research and social justice purposes, through informing social policy and through transforming communities. The social justice focus of this case study fits well here.

Processes that demonstrate both trustworthiness and authenticity in qualitative research are summarised by Liamputtong (2009, pp.24-28) and are listed here as they
apply to the research design.

- **Prolonged Engagement and fieldwork**: Engagement with participants was over a time span of 2.5 years of active OUA study periods (2013-2016), with ongoing contact in the form of emails informing participants of the progress of the research and inviting comments, and/or involvement in follow-up questionnaires and interviews.

- **Thick description**: Extensive interviews provided in-depth data of participants’ experiences. Additionally, qualitative questionnaire responses and, in the case of student participants, reflective assignments extended the type and quantity of data available for analysis.

- **Member Checking**: Participants were sent and invited to comment on copies of their interview transcripts and the categories and themes which were established through data analysis. These were derived from quotes taken from their own and other participants’ questionnaires/interviews. They were also sent links to published material from the study (Liamputtong, 2009).

- **Triangulation**: A range data of collection methods were used including open-ended questionnaires, interviews, document analysis. This provided observation of the research issues from a number of different points within the raw data. Added to this, four external data sources and the existing literature were used to gain additional knowledge that was not influenced by researcher subjectivity, in order to justify and underpin the findings (Flick, 2004, p. 179).

- **Review**: Participants were revisited through follow-up emails. Students were invited to complete qualitative questions in the second questionnaire in order to assess if anything had changed in their subsequent experiences (Johnson & Rasulova, 2017, p. 277). Tutors were informed that they could offer comments on the research at any time. Some participants declined to be involved in a review.
3.3.7 Limitations of the study

The major limitation of this study is the small size of the sample of the students and tutors who participated in the qualitative phases of the study. Qualitative research uses depth and detail to build complex understandings of particular phenomena. While generalisations cannot be made from the findings of this study, it does provide an in-depth exploration of participant’s experiences to further understanding of the complex phenomena involved.

A second limitation of the study arose from the difficulties involved in seeking out the voices of students who did not complete the unit. While the experiences of successful students present an authentic and important aspect of online learning in higher education, there are voices missing from this study, particularly those of students with whom contact is never made in the learning spaces.

Another missing element from this study is the perspective of non-casual university staff. While the focus of this study was specifically on the experiences of casual academic teachers, it needs to be remembered that this is only one aspect of the higher education workplace. Permanent staff are subject to similar trends to those that affect casual staff and their experiences are interrelated with those presented here (Barcan, 2018).
Chapter 4  Article 1

Students Flourish and Tutors Wither: A Study of Participant Experiences in a First-Year Online Unit


- **Research aim addressed:** To gain a deeper understanding of how current trends in higher education are experienced by students and tutors in ATU100

- **Major Research Question addressed:** How are current higher education trends influencing the teaching and learning experiences of the online students and casual teaching academics who are placed on the edge of the academy?

- **Research question specific to the article:** How do students and tutors experience the higher education teaching and learning conditions produced by three contemporary trends- wider student participation, flexible online learning, and casualisation of academic teaching?
Students Flourish and Tutors Wither: A Study of Participant Experiences in a First-Year Online Unit

Abstract: Contemporary higher education has been affected by three policy pressures with flexibility as their keyword. The policies of widening student participation and expanding flexible online delivery combine to open up the opportunity of a university education to students hitherto largely excluded. Flexible employment policies have increasingly placed university teaching into the hands of casual tutors without permanent academic positions. This article contextualises and outlines initial findings from a qualitative case study of a first year, online unit which is a representative microcosm of the teaching and learning conditions produced by these pressures. While the students in the study felt able to successfully enter the academic community and experience empowering and transformational learning, the tutors felt disempowered and devalued with little hope for a future in the academy.

4.1 Introduction

Flexibility is a key word in the contemporary higher education system in Australia. Flexible and diverse entry and exit points, as well as flexible forms of recognising learning, open up the possibility of attaining a university degree for students ‘…hitherto largely excluded from university attendance’ (Birrell & Edwards, 2009, p. 8). Flexible modes of course delivery centring on online learning allow a further widening of access to university studies for students unable or unwilling to travel to and from campus (Norton & Cherastidtham, 2014), often due to location, employment and/or family commitments, or medical reasons. An increase in university enrolments of ‘non-traditional’ students, particularly those classified as mature-age, regional or remote, low socio-economic status or with disabilities, has been one result. At the same time, government funding for higher education has been tightened and regulatory pressures have increased, requiring universities to adopt flexible workplace models (Percy & Beaumont, 2008). This has changed employment patterns at universities, with a decrease in permanent academic positions and a rise in the number of casual teaching staff, both in actual numbers and as a proportion of teaching academics. In 2010, the proportion of teaching only positions taken by casual staff was put at 86.5% while 52% of all university teaching was performed by casuals (National Tertiary Education Union, 2016).
Australian higher education is therefore experiencing some of its most substantial growth in two groups which can be regarded as being on the periphery of the academy: non-traditional students and casual academic teachers. This article explores the literature regarding these trends, and contextualises and outlines findings from the initial stage of a case study into a first year, online unit, pseudonymously named Academic Transition Unit or ATU100 for research purposes. This unit can be seen as a representative microcosm of the conditions produced by three major policy pressures centred on flexibility: the widening of student participation; the growth of flexible online delivery; and the casualisation of academic teaching. Using qualitative methods, the overall aim of the research is to develop an in-depth picture of how the participants in ATU100 experience contemporary higher education learning and teaching within the unit, and thus allow the effects of these pressures to become more apparent.

ATU100 is a compulsory first year unit focusing on academic conventions, offered online by a major Australian university through Open Universities Australia (OUA). The number of students studying degree courses fully online has grown significantly. According to Norton and Cherastidtham (2014), 18 percent of all higher education students were studying off-campus in 2013. This does not include students studying a mix of off-campus and on-campus units. The option of studying their degrees online through avenues such as OUA is taken up by students who have widely varying reasons for preferring this mode to studying on campus, creating an extremely diverse cohort. This increase of online students has been accompanied by a corresponding growth in online university teaching, including the wide employment of casual academics as online tutors. This is in line with the trend towards the use of casual teaching academics across universities. The percentage of university teaching carried out by casual academics is variably put at between 21 (Norton & Cherastidtham, 2014) and 53 (Ryan, Groen, McNeil, Nadolny, & Asit, 2011) percent. This discrepancy reflects casual academics’ secondary status (Ryan et al., 2011) within the academy, with a number of universities unable to give accurate data on how many casual academics they employ or the conditions of their employment (Coates, Dobson, Goedegebure, & Meek, 2009). In the case of ATU100, upward of 90 percent of the tutors are casuals.

The students and tutors involved in ATU100 represent two substantial groups who participate in a learning space on the edge of the academy created as a result of contemporary policy with its emphasis on flexibility. The literature points to major difficulties for both these groups.
4.2 From the Literature

4.2.1 Challenges of online study

The growth in academic transition units, such as ATU100, is largely due to the recognition that it can no longer be assumed that students entering university are equipped to succeed in their degrees. As stated by James (2010, p. 10), ‘… universities must accept that one of their roles is to address shortfalls in schooling for some people’. Findings by Cupitt & Golshan (2015) suggest that online study may form a de-facto equity pathway as students who are otherwise disadvantaged use online education as a gateway to university. Such students are likely to have a ‘fragile self-belief’ (Yorke & Longden, 2004, p. 83) about their capacity to succeed in an academic environment, less sense of belonging or fitting in at university (Berger, 2000), and to be intimidated and overwhelmed by their first year (Mcinnis & James, 2004). Fully online students have the additional challenge of acquiring proficiency in navigating the online learning site, at the same time as they are developing academic competence (Bach, Haynes, & Lewis Smith, 2007, p. 7). In response to the needs of non-traditional students, most universities offer physical spaces on campus where students can find academic support, but these are not generally accessible to online students (Muldoon & Wijeyewardene, 2012) putting them at a further disadvantage. While the literature paints an overall bleak picture of the multiple challenges facing online students who are new to university, personal determination and a love of learning (Stone, 2008) appear to be elements that can lead to student success.

4.2.2 Perseverance and retention

It has certainly been widely noted that the levels of attrition in fully online courses are higher than that of comparable courses in which students complete at least some of their studies on campus (Cupitt & Golshan, 2015). However, Nichols (2010) discusses the complexity surrounding the issue of online student retention and how it can be measured, as well as the fact that a certain level of attrition is normal. Personal determination is a key element cited by successful online students (Nichols, 2010; Beck & Milligan, 2014). Cupitt and Golshan, (2015) suggest that online students need more grit as well as greater institutional and peer support in order to overcome their greater challenges and achieve success. Also important to retention is a genuine excitement about the opportunity to participate in university study, which for many students is only possible through the online environment. Stone (2008) mentions a love of learning and
the desire to continue, as well as feelings of independence, fulfilment, confidence and personal growth gained by mature-age students entering university via a non-traditional pathway. Mature-aged students are highly represented in ATU100.

4.2.3 The importance of the tutor for non-traditional, online students

The de-facto equity pathway created by online learning results in a high proportion of non-traditional students in units such as ATU100. The literature suggests an increased importance of the tutor’s role in enabling institutions to respond effectively to these students’ needs. James (2010) asserts that new forms of pedagogy are required as students who do not meet institutions’ current perceptions of university-level ability enter the academic community. Yorke (2004) also mentions the need for radical changes in pedagogy in the context of mature-aged students, to provide the social element shown to be important in promoting retention (Tinto, 2007). Thus, the ability of the institution to design new pedagogies for non-traditional students, and of individual tutors to implement them are important concerns for retention.

Individual tutors are also shown to have a crucial role to play in supporting the self-belief of non-traditional students and helping them to understand university expectations (Yorke, 2004; Yorke & Longden, 2004; Mcinnis & James, 2004). In online learning environments, ‘…tutors… act as the human interface between the university and its students’ (Quartermaine, O’Hare, & Cooke, 2012, p. 66). The literature on online higher education emphasises teaching presence as being key to the quality of the student experience (Garrison et al., 2010). ‘The instructor does not become less important in e-learning…students experience the instructors’ support and expertise as especially important…’ (Paechter, Maier, & Macher, 2010, p. 228). Thus, pedagogical as well as technological innovations (Garrison, 2011) are involved in the response to the growth of flexible online delivery. Participation in online learning spaces is a complex phenomenon (Hrastinski, 2008). Bach et al. (2007) emphasise the need for skilful and experienced facilitation of online learning, conceivably requiring time and the provision of quality professional learning to develop.

4.2.4 The casualisation of academic teaching

While the literature calls for a reflective, adaptable and innovative pedagogy to meet the needs of both non-traditional and online students, the prevalent use of casual teaching academics means that many online tutors are not given the opportunity to develop such attributes (Percy & Beaumont, 2008; Lazarfeld Jensen & Morgan, 2009;
Brown, Goodman, & Yasukawa, 2010; Gottschalk & McEachern, 2010). Thus, tutors in units such as ATU100 often strive to develop their pedagogical skills in their own time and in isolation. Brown et al. (2010, p. 127) state that, ‘unlike continuing or fixed-term staff, casual teaching staff are not paid to develop and maintain their knowledge-base, yet are expected to deploy it in the teaching process’.

Percy and Beaumont (2008, p. 150) problematise ‘…taking action on the issue of casualisation only in terms of the provision of adequate training…’. They argue for holistic professional formation that includes casual academics within the collegial communities at the universities where they are engaged. Instead, casual academics too often become deskilled and marginalised on the ‘tenuous periphery’ of scholarly life (Brown et al., 2010, p. 170) while uncertainty about ongoing employment and their reliance on prior relationships with unit coordinators for continuing work, create a sense of financial and personal vulnerability (Brown et al., 2010; Gottschalk & McEachern, 2010; Lazarfeld Jensen & Morgan, 2009). Despite these adverse conditions, ‘the risk casualisation poses to the individual worker barely rates a mention in government and university policy and guidelines’ (Percy & Beaumont, 2008, p. 147). Rather, discussions generally centre on the perceived risk that casualisation poses to the quality of teaching that students receive (Ryan et al., 2011).

4.3 The Relevance of ATU100

The two pressures of widening student participation and delivering flexible online learning create the need for academic transition units that are taught fully online. The third pressure of casualising academic teaching ensures that casual tutors are highly represented amongst teaching staff. ATU100 encapsulates the conditions produced these three policy pressures in a bounded teaching and learning space providing a setting for investigating the type of experiences these conditions create for tutors and students. ATU100 is a large unit with the OUA versions regularly enrolling 500 to 600 students per study period. The vast majority of these students have been away from study for some time. In general, these students enrol in ATU100 as the first unit towards their bachelor degree, which makes it an important gateway to a positive and successful university experience. Given the potential problems emphasised in the literature, the student experience could be expected to be difficult, if not overwhelming. Nevertheless, findings suggest that ATU100 is meeting its aims for students, which centre on
equipping them for successful entry into the academic community. This also suggests that tutors are delivering the unit successfully.

4.4 The Interviews

4.4.1 Methodology

As a qualitative/interpretivist case study focusing on ATU100, this research aims to capture the experience of the unit participants in dealing with the effects of the three major pressures outlined above, using Constructive Grounded Theory Method for data analysis. Interpretivist research seeks to ‘…get into the head of the actor’ (Schwandt, 2000, p. 192) in order to gain a deep understanding of their lived experience. However, Laverty (2003) cautions that this understanding is necessarily combined with subjective meanings brought by the researcher, as the act of interpreting is influenced by their socio-historically inherited traditions and personal experiences. In addition to my role as researcher, I have participated in ATU100 as a tutor, adding a subjective, insider lens. Constructive Grounded Theory acknowledges the place of researcher subjectivity (Charmaz, 2005) in constructing theory from data and moves away from the positivist view that theory is something external to be discovered. Engaging with early findings is an important element of emerging design, a pivotal grounded theory strategy whereby the researcher uses constant analysis of data to inform and design the subsequent research stages. Initial sampling addresses the initial research questions to start the process of establishing theoretical categories and refining the research design according to established sampling criteria (Charmaz, 2014).

4.4.2 The sample

This phase involved a sample of three tutors and three students who had participated in ATU100, selected with both ethical and theoretical concerns in mind. The three tutors were chosen because they were not tutoring this specific unit at the time the research was conducted. This was a response to the ethical concern of a possible conflict of interest between their participation in the research and their interaction with current ATU100 students and colleagues. The students in the sample had completed the unit previously, and were chosen as a response to the theoretical evidence of the importance of personal determination and tutor support to perseverance in the online learning environment, as outlined above. All three students had expressed doubts to their tutor about their academic ability at a mid-point in their study periods, but subsequently completed the unit successfully. The initial research stage has utilised in-
Online study is a gateway to university opportunities

The data provided by the students who formed the initial research sample paint a bright picture of the benefits to students provided by the policies of widening student participation and flexible online delivery. All three students were very enthusiastic about the unit and the opportunity to study at university level, as comments from the interviews reveal. Student 1 (S1): ‘I think it’s an amazing unit.’ Student 2 (S2): ‘It’s been wonderful for me.’ Student 3 (S3): ‘Yes, very happy. I really enjoyed the course.’ It was specifically the opportunity to study a degree online that enabled these students access to the university experience, supporting the contention that online study acts as a de-facto equity pathway (Cupitt & Golshan, 2015). S1 experiences health problems which make her intermittently house bound, S2 lives in a rural location, while S3 has been diagnosed with bipolar disorder which makes going to campus a stressful experience. In her own words, ‘In spite of having greater stability, if I’d attempted to do a real time course rather than an online course…I think the pressures probably would have been too much for me even at this point.’ The flexibility of online study is also beneficial to these students. ‘The online courses allow me to pace myself so as to minimise any disruption to my medical treatment’ (S1). ‘It is easier to fit around my life…so it was my only option.’ (S2).

Technical and pedagogical problems are associated with online learning

The online learning experience was not without its problems. S2 mentioned being scared off by the technological aspect of studying online for some time before taking the plunge and enrolling. ‘Technologically I think it was a huge challenge, and the lack of self-confidence in that sense…’. S1 felt ‘isolated and alone’ as an online student at times, and frustrated with the asynchronous nature of the learning site. ‘Waiting for answers is the most difficult aspect of studying online’ (S1).

Tutors also found the practical use of technology for online teaching to be a challenge. In their interviews there was a sense of being thrown in at the deep end, with little or ineffectual training. As tutor 1 (T1) put it in her interview, ‘I was just into this world...[where] I was expected to know what I was doing because I was the tutor of an online unit.’ Tutor 2 (T2) also felt unprepared, ‘I am reasonably technically proficient, I’m a bit of a geek, but I still struggled.’ Tutor 3 (T3) mentioned that the pedagogical
aspects of the online environment were challenging at first, ‘When I first started I really just went in cold…It was difficult to know [what] should I spend time on…”.

**Online tutors have a heavier workload**

The workload associated with online teaching and the expectation of being constantly available to students were other issues mentioned by the tutors, a finding that reflects other studies such as Tynan, Ryan and Lamont-Mills (2015). Despite having taught ATU100 face to face, T1 felt that she needed to start again from scratch when tutoring the unit online for the first time, ‘…because it was just so different…the hours I did for the hours I got paid would have been just daft.’ T2 also felt that the hours she put into the unit were ‘much, much more than I got paid for…’ but mentioned ‘…it’s the same for internal tutoring.’ T1 felt that online students were ‘more needy in terms of constant attention. Students get upset with you because you don’t answer within the day…or the hour.’ T3 also felt that online students were demanding, as ‘…students…got quite annoyed that they couldn’t ring me and talk to me…’ rather than communicating via email. However, causal tutors, particularly those who teach online, are not given space on campus or access to university phone lines. Communicating to students by phone would necessitate handing out personal numbers, which tutors are reluctant to do.

There is clearly frustration with the constraints of online learning being expressed on the students’ part. Fielding this frustration adds to the tutors’ workload, ‘…because you don’t know how to answer 50 emails…how to stop the train’ (T1). In contrast, the students made no mention of a heavier workload associated with online study.

**Students feel part of a learning community**

Despite the drawbacks students associated with studying online, none of the students felt that these were significant impediments to their studies. In fact, there were aspects of the online learning experience that they particularly enjoyed, and all found it possible to feel part of a learning community. Due to having a mental illness, one of the reasons behind S3’s choice of online study was the desire to avoid studying in groups of people. Despite this, being in the learning community provided by the unit was something she found enjoyable, enriching and supportive. ‘I found it an amazing group of people…There was a feeling of being in a safety net [because] there were these open-minded, sympathetic kind of people that were there to talk to if I needed it…’ (S3).

Although S1 mentioned feeling isolated and alone during her interview, she also found that the real-time, interactive sessions offered at intervals during the study period were
effective in creating a sense of community. ‘It made me feel like I was actually part of a class rather than separate…It gave us a bit of camaraderie…’. S2 found the engagement in the discussion area ‘…important because it enables you to feel part of the community’ just as effectively as in a face-to-face classroom. ‘You don’t feel like you’re isolated out in the bush somewhere battling with the Internet…there are actually people out there that you have …common ground with…’. There is certainly a sense of genuine connectedness with a learning community revealed through these comments.

Students appreciated the richness provided by meeting and interacting with people who have diverse life experiences, through the common bond of studying ATU100.

*Tutors face a complex learning space with minimal support*

For the tutors, the diversity of the students was seen as challenging. The OUA cohort compared with on campus students clearly presents tutors with a wider range of people and situations to manage, some of which can be quite extreme. ‘I had one [student] who was sleeping in her car, she’d been kicked out of her house, with two children…’ (T3). There was a perceived lack of preparation in ways to manage the online, non-traditional cohort represented in the unit in comparison to on-campus students, and how to translate the teaching skills gained in the face to face classroom to the online environment. ‘I would have loved some pre-training in the technical aspects, and the nature of the teaching…it is a separate thing, but it is all meshed in together’ (T1). Formal opportunities to develop and reflect on the complex pedagogical aspects of their work seem to be completely lacking. Such opportunities would be welcomed, ‘….because then I could actually feel that I was advancing my knowledge and my career…and getting acknowledged for it’ (T1). Instead, there was ‘…maybe the odd coffee with the unit coordinator or the other tutors once in a while…but no formal avenue to discuss how it was all going’ (T3).

Tutors felt devalued by the lack of opportunities afforded to them to develop as university educators. ‘The reluctance of the university system to invest in our futures and in professional development for us…reduces our ability to teach’ (T2). Tutors did, however, appreciate the richness of experience brought by the diversity of the OUA cohort. ‘It becomes more challenging to teach because you’re dealing with more diverse backgrounds, levels, experiences…and…it is more rewarding because of the same things’ (T1). ‘They have so much more in their brains to bring to their education’ (T2).
Tutors have an important supporting role

Even though tutors are dealing with very complex challenges within the online learning space with little preparation and almost no professional development opportunities, they still put in long hours and strive to do their best for their students ‘…because you want to do a good job, that’s what you do’ (T1). Tutors found they needed to provide more emotional support and understanding to the OUA cohort. ‘My support mostly consists of sending back emails that said, “Don’t panic, remember to breathe”, rather than, “This is how you do it”’ (T2). T3 felt the need to be different things to different students as some “…need that continual support”.

The students interviewed found tutor support important to their experience in the unit. Both S1 and S3 considered dropping out at points during the study period. ‘There were certainly times when I considered quitting not only the unit but the entire degree’ (S1). Amongst other things, ‘…personal emails to the tutor kept me going’ (S1). S3 found intensive tutor guidance at the start of the unit helped her cope with the more self-directed learning expected towards the end of the study period. S2 also appreciated the accessibly of her tutor, who ‘encouraged me beyond what I could imagine.’

Students’ personal determination was important to completion of the unit

The three students of the initial sample all found the learning community and tutor support to be beneficial aspects of their experience in ATU100. A further crucial element for persevering in the unit was their own personal determination, or grit. S3 felt she could link the strength gained from dealing with a mental illness to persistence in the unit. ‘I think it just gives you this inner determination or drive…to accomplish things.’ For both S2 and S3, personal determination was a major driver that enabled them to complete the unit. ‘Persistence and determination…You’ve got to want it’ (S2). Each student found the experience of completing the unit uplifting and empowering. Developing technological proficiency and coping with online learning, interacting with fellow students, discovering resilience and achieving success with challenging academic material, all combined to transform students’ self-perceptions and their personal self-esteem, as well as how they see the world around them.

Transformational learning was achieved by students

In this way, it seems that transformational learning was achieved by the three students interviewed. According to Willans and Seary (2011), transformational learning occurs when students construct new meaning structures to make sense of their changing
world and the changes within themselves. S1 valued the opportunity to ‘…challenge my preconceived ideas…[and] look through a different lens…at the world.’ She found that the unit ‘…altered my perception of even who I am as an individual and where I fit within the social norms…’. S3 also ‘found the material really interesting…to be able to figure out my viewpoints on a lot of things I hadn’t thought about in a while.’ S2 gained a new sense of self-confidence in her ability to articulate her ideas. ‘I feel now I have something to say… I’m not just a housewife who is dated…I’m a different person now.’

The students also experienced a great sense of personal achievement in completing the unit successfully. ‘It was fantastic! It was a really good…confidence boost to get that mark’ (S3). Despite doubts and challenges, the overall experience of the students interviewed in this initial research phase was one of empowerment.

*Tutors are disempowered*

This sense of empowerment and enhanced self-esteem was not an outcome shared by the tutors. In fact, the opposite seemed to be the case as tutors felt devalued and powerless across many aspects of their work. The tutors felt that the lack of opportunity to have a consistent presence on campus negatively impacted on both their teaching and their relationships with their colleagues within the academic community. ‘You don’t necessarily have the relationships with on campus people’ (T3). Tutors’ ongoing uncertainty about whether their work in the unit would continue seemed to have a strong effect on their emotional wellbeing: ‘You feel really slapped in the face for that… I hate it’ (T1); ‘It doesn’t really seem fair…I was hurt…’ (T3), and their financial wellbeing: “I don’t have job security…so there’s the financial consequence of not having secure employment” (T2).

This uncertainty seemed to create a strong feeling of powerless frustration. All three tutors felt that the allocation of work was based on a unit coordinator’s arbitrary preferences rather than experience or merit. T1 felt her years of experience in both on-campus and online teaching was invisible to the university. ‘You get more and more experience but you actually get no recognition for that at all.’ If formal recognition of teaching excellence does occur, it seems to have no bearing on allocation of work, as T3’s experience demonstrates: ‘I’ve had an award for professionalism, I’ve also had the OUA tutor award, I’ve worked as a coordinator… Now [the unit] has gone through another revolution and a new unit coordinator… so I’m not being offered the work.’ University teaching appears to operate ‘…informally on a system of patronage’ (T2).
Building and maintaining relationships is vital. However, if unit coordinators move on or are replaced, the relationships vanish with them. The rewards of being a casual tutor appear to be limited to personal satisfaction for teaching well. As T1 says, ‘I keep coming back because I actually enjoy teaching.’ However, this type of satisfaction has its limits and all three tutors felt that there was no future for them in university teaching. As T2 noted, “people move on... away from teaching. People leave academia.”

4.5 Statistical Findings

Data from the Online Learner Engagement Survey 2014-2015 conducted by National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education (used with permission) and from the ATU100 online learning site suggest that the positive outcomes that emerged from the student interviews are reflective of the wider unit cohort. The three students interviewed fit with the primary demographic traits of the cohort, and their successful completion of the unit is widely shared by students who begin ‘genuine participation’ in the unit as defined below. A large survey of casual staff conducted in 2014 by Voice Project (used with permission) at the university which offers the unit confirms that the concerns expressed by the tutors who were interviewed are also widely shared.

4.5.1 The student cohort

Information and a link to the Online Learner Engagement Survey was posted on the unit’s online sites across an eighteen-month period resulting in 126 responses from ATU100 students. The results show that the OUA version of the unit enrolls a very different age group from the on-campus version where the majority of students are still school leavers. Of the respondents, students over the age of 25 accounted for 78 percent of the cohort, with the largest numbers in the 30 to 49 age group. 75 percent of respondents were female. All three students interviewed fit into this demographic picture. The survey data suggest a higher portion of students with other important commitments in life besides study, which also emerged from the interviews. Information on educational attainment support the idea that the OUA students have been away from study for some time. In addition, 37 percent of respondents indicated that they were the first in their family to study at university. These figures point to a large number of ATU100 students unfamiliar with contemporary university level study. Further to this, 61 per cent of respondents indicated that they were mostly new to the subject of their degree, highlighting the importance of the transition phase provided by
ATU100. The students interviewed had all been away from study for a number of years, and welcomed the transitional aspect of the unit. S1 was first in family and new to university study, S2 had completed a degree, but in a very different field, while S3 had twice attempted university study but had withdrawn.

4.5.2 Retention and attrition

The figures from the online learning site of one study period were analysed, and are closely representative of other study periods for ATU100 and indeed OUA in general. At first glance the attrition rate is alarming. For the study period in question, of all the students who enrolled in the unit, only 39 percent completed, indicating a 61 percent attrition rate. However, a closer look raises the question as to whether many of the enrolled students had any real intention of participating. 17 percent of the students never logged into Blackboard, while a further 30 percent never submitted assignments. Thus, 47 percent of enrolling students did not begin what could be considered as full participation in the unit. This may indicate that some students have different reasons for enrolling in the unit than a firm decision to undertake a degree.

Taking the remaining students, who attempted at least the first assignment, as the participating cohort, the rate of non-completion falls to 28 percent. This supports the contention of Nichols that the complexity surrounding student retention must be taken into account when attempting to understand the online student experience. ‘Difficulties arise in terms of who to count as having dropped out’ (Nichols, 2010, p. 95). While the literature indicates significant challenges for non-traditional, online students, the statistics from the study period analysed suggest students were able to overcome these challenges and achieve success in the unit. The majority of students who demonstrated an intention to participate experienced success in this study period, reflective of the students who were interviewed.

4.5.3 Tutor dissatisfaction

The 2014 survey of casual staff conducted at the university which offers the unit reveals that the dissatisfaction expressed the tutors who participated in the research is common. The survey was conducted online and received 353 responses. Staff were asked to respond to a range of statements using a Likert scale. Regarding reasons for choosing casual teaching, the highest agreement was given to a statement describing the satisfaction gained from helping students learn, which is reflective of interview responses. In the overall survey, the two lowest rates of agreement were in the category
of career opportunities, specifically the lack of a career path and of opportunities for permanent positions. Fairness and equity, pay and recognition, and workload and wellbeing, were the other categories which garnered very low rates of agreement, detailing a lack of consistency with how staff are managed, not being valued by the university, and a lack of commitment to staff wellbeing. These responses are entirely consistent with the concerns mentioned by the research participants.

4.6 Discussion

The three flexibility pressures which are spotlighted by the unit, widening student participation, online delivery and casualisation of academic teaching, seem to have impacted the tutors in the study more negatively than the students. The literature suggests that non-traditional online students who are new to university face multiple challenges. Initial findings from the case study indicate that for some students these challenges can be successfully overcome. Students’ ‘fragile self-belief’ (Yorke & Longden, 2004, p.83) can be strengthened and transformed, as they successfully manage feelings of being intimidated and overwhelmed (Mcinnis & James, 2004) by their first university experience, and discover themselves to be capable of persevering and completing the unit to a high standard. The literature points out potential problems for non-traditional, online students in developing a sense of belonging to the university community (Berger, 2000).

However, the students interviewed were able to share a sense of supportive camaraderie with their peers through the online learning site. Pedagogical challenges in meeting the needs of online and non-traditional students (James, 2010; Yorke, 2004) appear to have been met successfully within the unit, as students’ comments showed high levels of satisfaction with the unit content, as well as the support offered by their tutors. The statistics from a typical study period indicate that a good proportion of participating students can be successful in the unit, which may indicate that the experience of the students who were interviewed is more widely shared.

Given the greater complexities afforded by units such as ATU100, and the lack of opportunities given to casual tutors to develop their professional skills in response, it appears that tutors are donating significant amounts of their own time to achieve a quality experience for their students. This suggests that personal goodwill rather than institutional strategy is being used to ensure the quality of teaching provided by casual tutors. However, this brings significant personal cost to the individual tutors as revealed
through the interviews above. Concerns about poor working conditions for casual
academic teachers are expressed repeatedly in the literature (Brown et al., 2010;
Gottschalk & McEachern, 2010; Lazarfeld Jensen & Morgan, 2009; Junor, 2003), yet
clearly persist for the tutors who were interviewed. As a result, tutors felt isolated and
devalued and saw little hope for their future in academia.

4.7 Conclusion

ATU100 is a unit in which the effects of contemporary higher education policies
centring on flexibility in teaching and learning are revealed. While the sample
investigated here is very small, given the comparisons with wider surveys, these finding
are likely to reflect more general student and staff attitudes. For students, policies of
widening student participation and online access to university study have facilitated
successful entry into the academic community and allowed them to experience
transformational learning. Theoretical sampling through the case study’s subsequent
stages will need to focus on more diverse student experience in an attempt to understand
why students enrol but do not participate in the unit, or start participation but do not
complete. The extent to which the positive results expressed by the three students in this
initial research stage are shared by other successful students in the unit also needs
further investigation.

Workplace flexibility does not seem to have negatively affected the quality of
teaching in ATU100, but has had a negative effect on the quality of the professional
experience for the three tutors interviewed, as well as on their personal self-esteem and
optimism for the future. Again, it will be important to ascertain how widely this
experience is shared by other tutors in the unit and colleagues in similar employment
situations. While it seems clear that casual teaching academics are deeply impacted by
contemporary employment practices at universities, the extent to which permanent
academic staff and those on short term contracts are affected also needs to be
considered.

Further in-depth interviews for all the participants in the initial research phase
will be important, as consistent with Constructive Grounded Theory Method. For the
students, these interviews should show if their experience in ATU100 has consolidated
into continuing successful university study, and for the tutors, they may reveal if they
have persevered with university teaching or taken their expertise to different fields of
employment. For both these groups, the ongoing effects of the policies which create the
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Chapter 5  Article 2

Fairness and Inclusion: Online Learning as an Enabler of Australian Higher Education Policies Aimed at Student Equity and Social Justice


- **Research aims addressed:** To gain a deeper understanding of how current trends in higher education are experienced by students and tutors in ATU100. To explore the implications of these experiences in relation to equity and social justice

- **Major research questions addressed:** What are the motivations, needs, and objectives of ATU100 students in enrolling in the unit and are these fulfilled through their experience? What does this imply for equity and social justice in student participation?

- **Research question specific to the article:** What is the relationship between social justice theory, policies on student equity in higher education and the experience of students who gain access to university study through online learning? To what extent are the objectives of ATU100 students met through their experience of studying online and what does this imply for equity and social justice?
Fairness and Inclusion: Online Learning as an Enabler of Australian Higher Education Policies Aimed at Student Equity and Social Justice

Abstract: Building social justice through access to higher education is a central concern for universities internationally. In Australia, as elsewhere, online delivery of degree programs provides an important avenue to implement government policies aimed at both increasing overall participation in higher education and widening the participation of students from disadvantaged backgrounds. These twin aspects of higher education policy reflect two differing models for achieving student equity in higher education; one which emphasises fairness and the other, inclusion. Using a qualitative research lens, this paper looks at the place of online study within a discussion of these two equity models and related social justice theories, supported by insights into the student experience gleaned from a small case study of a first-year online unit. The fairness model of student equity, with its focus on equitable distribution, is well supported by the unit’s high proportion of disadvantaged students. Yet it is the inclusion model, which provides room to go beyond the numbers and recognise the justice experienced by these students on an individual level, that more closely aligns with the transformative value that completing students report deriving from access to online study. Amartya Sen’s writings on social justice are foregrounded throughout the article.

5.1 Introduction

Over recent decades, higher education policies throughout much of the world have promoted the expansion of student participation at universities to address issues of social justice, with an emphasis on students from disadvantaged and low socio-economic backgrounds (Wilson-Strydom, 2015, p. 143). Released in 2009, the policy document, Transforming Australia’s Higher Education System (Australian Government, 2009), positioned student equity as a central concern for Australian universities. The policy introduced a demand-driven funding system, with the removal of caps on student numbers in many university courses (James, 2010); and a performance-based funding system, linked to the success of universities in attracting enrolments from specific categories of disadvantaged students (Gale & Tranter, 2011). Since 2009, changes in government and political focus have increasingly put the commitment to widening student participation contained in this policy under threat (Department of Education and Training, 2018b). An internationally recognised rationale for increased student access is
the role that higher education plays in promoting justice on a societal and individual level (Gaele Goastellec, 2008). In the global field, building social justice through access to higher education has become an indicator of reputable institutions, providing ‘an international standard... [and] a key point in the legitimating process of higher education policies and comparisons’ (Goastellec, 2008, p. 72).

Therefore, the successful implementation of policies for increasing and widening student participation is an important concern for universities, both financially and in terms of reputation. Since many universities offer fully online or blended courses as an ‘...institutional innovation related to enrolment growth...’ (Taylor & Holley, 2009, p. 81), online learning may also be viewed as an enabler of these policies. Drawing on Amartya Sen’s (2009) writings on justice and associated educational theories, this article is concerned with relating students’ experiences of online learning to equity in higher education and the socially just society which government policies seek to promote.

5.1.1 Online learning, student equity and social justice

Online course delivery provides an avenue for universities to implement policies on equity in higher education by giving the opportunity of a university education to a diverse range of students who would otherwise be excluded (Stone et al., 2016). Online learning has grown exponentially throughout the world with countries across all continents and economic conditions having online higher education platforms (International Council for Open and Distance Education, n.d.). The choice to study online is often made for reasons that preclude attendance on campus, such as home location, employment obligations, family commitments, and medical related issues. This can result in a higher proportional representation of “equity” students in online units.

There is a strong alignment with the target equity groups defined in Australian government policy as being under-represented in higher education, particularly ‘...people from low socio-economic status (SES) backgrounds; people from rural and remote locations, [and] people with a disability...’ (Downing, 2017, p. 20). This alignment is amplified when admission is also open access (Stone et al., 2016), which allows students to enrol without meeting course pre-requisites and is a characteristic of units offered by universities through Open Universities Australia (OUA). Consequently, online, open-access units are illustrative of the push to increase and widen access to
higher education, with indications that online learning can impact students’ lives in significant and transformative ways (Devlin & McKay, 2016).

The current higher education funding model in Australia still has its basis in the 2009 policy, Transforming Australia’s Higher Education System. Funding mechanisms outlined in the policy reflect two differing theoretical models for achieving student equity in higher education; one which emphasises fairness and the other, inclusion (Marginson, 2011a). The policy promotes fairness with a target of 20% of all students in higher education to be drawn from the lowest SES category by 2020. Inclusion, on the other hand, aims to raise the overall proportion of young Australians (24-35) with a bachelor level qualification to 40% by 2040 (Australian Government, 2009), with an increase in the participation of low SES students as a result. Thus, the focus of the fairness model is on a more equal proportional distribution of student places amongst social groups while the inclusion model emphasises enrolment growth as a whole.

Significantly, for the prescribed expansion of enrolments to be achieved, the inclusion target itself requires ‘...the recruitment of young people from social strata hitherto largely excluded from university attendance’ (Birrell & Edwards, 2009, p. 8). Therefore, inclusion, too, is ‘linked tightly with equity’ (James, 2010, p. 3). Marginson claims that strategies for inclusion allow a ‘...focus on strengthening the human agency of persons hitherto excluded’ (Marginson, 2011a, p. 27) and places this model in line with Sen’s (2009) ideas on social justice (Sen, 2009) and the importance of a focus on the individual rather than on institutional characteristics alone.

This article aims to situate the opportunities that online learning affords within a discussion of the two equity models and related social justice theories, supported by insights into the student experience derived from a qualitative case study of a first-year online unit. This small case study provides a means for the student voice to be heard within the discussion. Pseudonymously named ATU100 for research purposes, the unit is offered by a large public university through OUA. Generally taken as a first unit towards a Bachelor of Arts degree, the unit is designed to facilitate students’ transition into university level study and equip them for academic success. It therefore provides an ideal site for examining how student equity policies play out in the lives of new-to-university, online students.

Online learning must not only facilitate access but should also offer students
opportunities for increased justice in their lived experience if we are to consider this mode of delivery as playing a role in leveraging the social justice related aims underpinning policies of student equity. The fairness model is well supported by the unit’s high proportion of students who fall into the equity categories outlined above. Yet, as the following discussion proposes, it is the inclusion model with its emphasis on the justice actually experienced by individuals that more closely aligns with the transformative value that completing successful students report deriving from participation in the unit. It is also proposed that the value of inclusion extends beyond the student age range prescribed in the 2009 policy to mature age students who may have faced barriers to university study caused by past educational disadvantage.

5.2 Theoretical Framework

The ‘fairness’ and ‘inclusion’ goals of Australian higher education policy outlined above reflect contrasting equity models. According to Sen (2009), fairness draws on what he calls the theory of transcendental institutionalism, which firstly “concentrates its attention on what it identifies as perfect justice” (p. 5) and, secondly, “on getting institutions right” (p. 6). The focus is on institutional characteristics and what these might look like when a just situation is reached. Thus, the 20% target for low SES student participation is set as the ideal arrangement by which “equity is seen to be achieved once students have entered in the right proportions” (Gale, 2012, p. 254). This arrangement-focused view of justice aligns with the distributive justice paradigm, which aims to quantify fair proportional distribution as a way of addressing equity issues. Gewirtz, (1998) suggests that distributive justice is the conventional conception and is commonly seen as “…synonymous with social justice” (p. 470). Online learning contributes to distributive justice in higher education by allowing students who find it difficult to attend campus the opportunity to enrol at university.

One problem with this paradigm is that theories of distributive justice tend to focus on the ‘ideal’ (Wilson-Strydom, 2015), which as Sen (2009) notes, is unlikely to be agreed upon or achieved. Marginson, (2011a) asserts that difficulties in achieving the ideal create the risk of equity policy being seen as a failure even when advances have been made. Another problem with this approach is its lack of attention to the individual. Distributive justice characterises equitable access to higher education according to defined social categories (Gale & Tranter, 2011) without considering the human complexities and differences within these groups (Wilson-Strydom, 2015). Naylor and
James (2015) point out the considerable differences between different equity groups in terms of enrolment growth since 2009 and question whether ‘...defining social inclusion via group membership is the best method of pursuing equity in higher education’ (p. 2). Similarly, Sen (2009) questions the adequacy of an arrangement-focused view of justice: ‘The question to ask in this context is whether the analysis of justice must be so confined to getting the basic institutions and general rules right? Should we not also have to examine what actually emerges in society, including the kind of lives people actually lead...?’ (p. 10).

The inclusion model of Australian higher education policy concerns the goal of increasing the overall participation of students in higher education, bringing about the expansion of places for low SES students as part of this overall increase. The inclusion model is proposed as more feasible and achievable than the fairness model (Marginson, 2011a). Its major value lies in the room it provides to shift the focus away from seeing disadvantaged students in terms of numbers, towards seeing them as people whose experiences of higher education are individual. Inclusion aligns well with Sen’s view of social justice (Sen, 2009); his idea of social realisations, concerned with ‘...the lives that people can actually live...’ and the ‘...capabilities that people actually have...’ (p. 19), and his notion of capabilities, describing an individual’s freedom and ability to be or do “what he or she has reason to value” (p. 231).

In the higher education context, an emphasis on capabilities aligns with recent theories regarding wider student participation, such as Third Generation Transition (T3) (Gale & Parker, 2014) and Southern Theory (Gale, 2012), which emphasise the need to move beyond numerical, point of entry models for determining the success of student equity policy. Rather, students’ lives must be ‘seen inclusively’ (Sen, 2009, p. 19) with the concern on fostering their actual capacities, particularly of those who are victims of injustice (Marginson, 2011a). The inclusion of older students in the equity discussion, whose circumstances may have previously prevented university attendance, is consistent with the idea of correcting injustice. The inclusion model ascribes value to higher education for its ability to enhance the individual agency of a diverse range of students, as well as for its contribution to wider society. It is the importance of a focus on inclusion which emerges most strongly from the case study of ATU100 discussed in the section below.
5.3 Methodology and the Research Process

The focus of this paper lies in linking theories of social justice through higher education to the lived experiences of those who have gained access to university study via online delivery. While discussions of theories and policies are important, exploring these discussions from the perspective of participants imparts deeper meaning (O'Shea, 2014). Qualitative perspectives may be missing from accounts of policy since they are “more invisible, personal and difficult to measure” (Gale, 2014, p. 262) than quantitative accounts. This paper aims to contribute to the visibility of such perspectives, by focusing on the experiences of twelve online students within a qualitative, instrumental case study of ATU100. While the number of case study participants is small, their voices lend a powerful first-hand frame of reference to this discussion and may also by extrapolation provide insight into the experiences of students in similar circumstances.

Qualitative/interpretivist research methods aim to develop an in-depth and nuanced understanding of research participants’ experiences (Creswell, 2008). An insider lens is added here through the author’s involvement in the unit as a member of teaching staff, with the aim of allowing this subjective experience to play a positive role in the search for meaning (Laverty, 2003). Constructivist Grounded Theory is a method of data analysis which acknowledges the place of researcher subjectivity (Creswell, 2008). Charmaz (2014) describes this method as moving away from the positivist view that meaning is something external to be discovered. Rather, understanding is a construction between the research participants and the researcher via the researcher’s interpretation. Charmaz (2014) acknowledges that elements of Constructivist Grounded Theory may be adopted and adapted to suit ‘diverse studies’ (p. 16).

This research utilised the Grounded Theory elements of \textit{initial sampling} and \textit{emerging design}. The first phase of the research involved a pilot study which utilised \textit{initial sampling} to identify potential themes and inform the research design. \textit{Emerging design} was used throughout the study and describes a process by which the researcher collects data, immediately analyses it, and subsequently makes decisions about the next step in the research process (Creswell, 2008). \textit{Emerging design} allows the researcher to remain responsive to the data. This approach enabled a change of focus towards the development of themes, rather than a theory, as the end point of the research (Charmaz, 2014). It was found that themes could link more readily to broader macro policies,
consistent with an instrumental case study (R. E. Stake, 2005). *Thematic analysis* was then introduced into the study, which is described as ‘…the search for and identification of common threads that extend throughout a set of data’ (Kehrwald, 2008, p. 93). Themes are comprised of these threads of underlying meaning subject to abstract conceptualisation (Vaismoradi et al., 2016).

### 5.3.1 The research participants and process

Overall, the case study consisted of twelve students who had previously participated in the unit in one of six study periods across 2013-2016. ATU100 runs across all four study periods of the OUA academic year. Details in the table below were given by students in pre-interview questionnaires. For ethical reasons, students’ names have been altered and no personal identifiers have been used.

#### Table 5.5-1: The 12 student participants in the research

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Study Period</th>
<th>Age Group</th>
<th>Income Bracket</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Highest level of previous study</th>
<th>Time away from study</th>
<th>Reason for choosing to study online</th>
<th>Successful (completed and passed)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Moira</td>
<td>SP3 2013</td>
<td>46-55</td>
<td>Lowest</td>
<td>Major metro</td>
<td>Bachelor degree attempted</td>
<td>9 years</td>
<td>Requires ongoing medical treatment</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Melissa</td>
<td>SP2 2014</td>
<td>46-55</td>
<td>Lowest</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>Bachelor degree completed</td>
<td>22 years</td>
<td>Rural location and family commitments</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amanda</td>
<td>SP3 2014</td>
<td>26-35</td>
<td>Not given</td>
<td>Major metro</td>
<td>Bachelor degree attempted</td>
<td>15 years</td>
<td>Disability (bipolar disease) and single mother</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Louise</td>
<td>SP2 2015</td>
<td>56-65</td>
<td>Highest</td>
<td>Major metro</td>
<td>Bachelor degree attempted</td>
<td>20 years</td>
<td>Carer for husband and two children with disabilities</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ayla</td>
<td>SP2 2015</td>
<td>66-75</td>
<td>Lowest</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>Bachelor degree attempted</td>
<td>40 years</td>
<td>Too far from nearest university to commute</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joanna</td>
<td>SP3 2015</td>
<td>36-45</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Major metro</td>
<td>High school completed</td>
<td>20 years</td>
<td>Disabled single mother and two of her children have disability</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Students were emailed a pre-interview questionnaire consisting of a mix of open-ended questions and statements with Likert-scale responses, along with an invitation to participate in one or more interviews. A mix of purposeful sampling and broad-based sampling was used throughout the research process. The first three students listed in the table were involved in the initial sampling of the pilot study. Broad-based sampling followed, with emails being sent to approximately 350 students in two study periods to which four students responded. Purposeful sampling was then used to seek out specific types of students; both to confirm findings that were emerging from the study, and to seek out those not yet adequately represented, namely non-completers, male students and school leavers. 23 students were identified by the researcher and were sent personalised emails, resulting in five new participants.

Of the 12 participants, eight consented to be interviewed while four made written contributions. The interviews lasted from 45-60 minutes and were conducted and recorded using online conferencing software and subsequently transcribed. An initial table of themes was then developed using quotes from the interviews. These themes were sent to the participants for checking through a follow-up questionnaire. The research participants were also asked to give permission for their reflective journals, completed as a unit assessment, to be analysed for correspondence to the
themes in order to gain a real-time perspective on their experiences. The written texts from the interview transcripts, questionnaires and journals were then re-analysed to produce the final themes. Through these processes, data was triangulated for trustworthiness (Creswell, 2008).

With the small number of participants, these qualitative themes enable students’ individual experiences to remain visible while signalling the commonalities between them. The majority of the students who participated in the research were mature age females who completed the unit successfully. They were the most enthusiastic responders to the research invitation. It proved more difficult to obtain responses from non-completing students. One non-completer responded in the broad-based sampling phase and was interviewed. The other non-completer responded to a targeted personal email and gave permission for her email reply to be used in the research but declined further participation. In response to personal emails, one male student agreed to participate via questionnaire only, and the school leaver agreed to full participation after receiving a targeted email. For this reason, the findings here may be less indicative of the experiences of these types of students.

The overarching research question addressed by the case study was:

- To what extent are the objectives of ATU100 students met through their experience of studying online and what does this imply for equity and social justice?

Themes developed from the case study include:

- Online study is the means for students to gain access to a degree

  All the research participants stated that they could only access university study via online delivery.

- Students are highly enthusiastic about the unit after completion

  Research participants found the unit to be enjoyable and extremely helpful in their transition to university study. Students used superlatives such as wonderful, grateful, and fabulous to describe their feelings after completing the unit.

- The unit is challenging but the challenges had beneficial outcomes
Research participants found that overcoming the challenges of adjusting to the scholarly terminology and research that they were introduced to in the unit gave them a sense of achievement, and important skills for further study.

- Interaction with peers can create a sense of being in a learning community
- Support from others involved in the unit helps students to persevere but personal determination is the key element for successful completion

Research participants reported feeling supported and welcomed by their peers.

- The unit may transform students’ thinking and self-perceptions in positive ways

Research participants indicated that support from teaching staff and peers was important but personal determination was the most critical attribute that enabled them to persevere.

It was the emergence of these positive themes from the case study which led the author to a deeper exploration of theories of equity and social justice in higher education and how they pertain to online learning, which is further discussed below.

5.4 Relating Social Justice to Online Learning: The Literature and the Student Voice

By joining together the literature, most notably Sen’s (2009) *The Idea of Justice*, and the student voice that emerged from the case study of ATU100, this section analyses the relationship between online learning in higher education and ideas of equity and social justice. Concerns about student attrition are first addressed followed by a deeper exploration of the two equity models, fairness and inclusion.

5.4.1 Attrition concerns

Stone (2017) notes that perseverance is more difficult in online environments with the rate of degree completion for online students significantly lower than that of on-campus students. This is a key concern raised in relation to online study which challenges the idea of online learning as an equity enabler. Yet, as Nichols (2010) points out, the measurement of attrition in online courses is complex. For example, it is
difficult to determine who should be counted in attrition numbers since it is more likely that students may ‘...drop out before the course even begins’ (p. 95) in the online environment, which can falsely inflate these figures. This indicates that some students may enrol in the unit without making a firm commitment to study or with no clear idea as to the nature and requirements of online study prior to enrolment.

The latter appears to be the case for Elise, who was interviewed as a non-completer. Elise is bedridden with illness but wanted to keep her intellect sharp. After she was given a second-hand iPad, she decided to enrol in ATU100 and start a university degree. During her interview, she expressed confusion about online study which was primarily caused by her inadequate technology. She stated: “I didn’t know the ins and outs of how to do it. It didn’t work out”.

In the context of open access online learning, Tresman (2002) challenges the perception that all attrition is negative. Non-completing students may be involved in movement across courses and institutions or may judge that they have met their personal objectives before formal completion. This acknowledges the agency of individuals to make their own choices in ways that have value to them. Having the possibility to choose is an important aspect of social justice as ‘...being able to reason and choose is a significant aspect of human life’ (Sen, 2009, p. 18).

It should be noted, however, that respect for students’ choices needs to be go beyond the provision of access. Georgiana, one of the non-completing participants, was deeply distressed by an administrative requirement to remain enrolled in the unit towards a fail result, when personal circumstances forced her to stop participating late in the study period: “...I feel punished and completely inadequate”. Georgiana’s response indicates an experience quite different to the positive accounts given by other participants. However, other negative experiences with online study is largely hidden from the research due to the difficulties of getting non-completers involved.

5.4.2 Fairness: an arrangement-focused view

The fairness aspect of higher education policy includes the goal of a 20% representation of low SES students within the student body (Australian Government, 2009). Online access opens up higher education to many students who would otherwise be excluded through a diverse range of circumstances, including disadvantage due to disability, remoteness, work and/or caring responsibilities, and so on. All the research
participants stated that online, flexible learning was their only enrolment option. As Joanna summed up: “Basically, if the units weren’t offered online I wouldn’t be able to study”. It follows, then, that online learning is one mode of delivery where the 20% goal is often exceeded, with students from low SES and other disadvantaged backgrounds ‘…represented particularly strongly in online undergraduate programs’ (Stone, 2017, p. 5). The findings from the ATU100 case study show that students derive a sense of belonging from being in a learning community where students share similar backgrounds and experiences. Research participants reported that they did not feel out of place but rather felt accepted and supported by their peers. For instance, Ayla stated “You didn’t feel like you were the only one in that – sort of – age group or with those kinds of experiences”.

The fragile self-belief that is common amongst equity students (Willans & Seary, 2011) was to some extent ameliorated by having these feelings widely shared by fellow students. This helped overcome the isolation often associated with online learning as students had the confidence to interact, as Janelle stated: “Just knowing that people are…lost and unsure…like I was, is very comforting and made me want to get online as often as I could to offer my advice and ideas to others”. The presence of higher proportions of equity students in the online learning community also works to remove the stigma these students may suffer on campus. For example, Mallman and Lee (2016) describe mature-age students on campus as being ‘disadvantaged by an identity that is marginalised’ (p. 687) compared to the traditional school-leaver identity, particularly because many of these older students also ‘represent historically marginalised demographics’ (p. 690). It is disadvantaged students who are the most likely to experience a sense of socio-cultural incongruity in the academic environment, which can hinder their success (Devlin, 2013). Online learning can provide an environment where the marginalised become the majority group, allowing greater confidence.

These types of individual experiences are peripheral to the considerations of the fairness/distributive justice paradigm, however, which concentrates almost exclusively on proportional representation at point of entry (Gale, 2012). There are also concerns that the over-selection required to shift proportional distribution can lead to claims that equity students lack merit (Marginson, 2011a), producing a deficit conception. This deficit model creates a perceived need for equity students to change to suit the academy and leaves aside ideas about how these students may themselves change and enhance
the academy. This creates a discourse of inadequacy surrounding equity students (Smit, 2012) which gives little regard to the quality of knowledge and experience that these students can contribute (Gale, 2012).

The implicit risk is that online learning, with its higher representation of equity students, could be perceived as a second-tier form of higher equation. It is thus highly important to consider the quality of online students’ experiences subsequent to enrolment, rather than access alone. It is also important not to dismiss expansion in the overall participation of low SES students when the proportional distribution may show little change (Marginson, 2011a). As Sen (2009) proposes, the value of access to higher education may be seen through the expansion of individual capabilities ‘…even if there is no distributional gain…’ (p. 298).

5.4.3 Inclusion: a social realisations view

The inclusion model for furthering student equity in higher education takes the focus off proportional distribution of places and allows room to look beyond the numbers of equity students an institution enrols to the experiences of the individuals themselves. We can then perceive the effects of access to higher education in students’ lives, following Sen’s (2009) concept of social realisations which ‘…demands that outcomes be seen in these broader terms…’ (p. 217). The focus shifts to individual capabilities, a term used by Sen (2009) to describe the freedom derived from ‘substantive opportunities’ (p. 287), such as those provided by online access. While the common experiences shared by members of socially disadvantaged groups cannot be discounted entirely, the inclusion approach allows recognition of the individual diversity within these groups and the importance of individual gains; ‘…what they learn, the effects in person formation and in labour market outcomes’ (Marginson, 2011a, p. 35). This thinking is in line with Sen’s (2009) emphasis on justice that is ‘…linked to the world that actually emerges, not just the institutions or rules we happen to have’ (p. 20).

In the educational context, understanding individual difference and agency is critical as a student’s ‘...specific personal, social, economic and familial context may be quite different from the context of other group members...’ (Wilson-Strydom, 2015, p. 148). There is a need to move away from perceiving equity students ‘according to pre-determined expectations rather than individual circumstances’ (O’Shea, Lysaght, Roberts, & Harwood, 2016, p. 330). Further, the label of ‘equity student’, as applied to
specific social groups, may not match students’ own self-perceptions (Trowler, 2015). Online learning allows students to disclose as much or as little of themselves as they wish. As trust grows in the learning community, more of their personal identities may be shared. This is shown through the students’ voices: for example, “I transformed from a student unable to participate, to one who really looked forward to reading and participating in the discussion threads” (Joanna) and “I tend to be an introvert, I can live without human contact. But I think for those days when things are harder it helps to have that human contact, to know that you aren’t alone” (Christiana).

The inclusion model acknowledges the ‘heterogeneity of experience and understanding’ (Trowler, 2015, p. 11) inherent in higher education spaces, and sees students as whole people with unique backgrounds, experiences and world-views (Gale & Parker, 2014). Inclusion is furthered through a two-way process of change and development between institution and students (Devlin, 2013). Institutions hold the responsibility to adapt to the realities of students’ lives and foster inclusion for diverse students by ‘…creating collaborative and inclusive spaces, in which students are encouraged to share their beliefs, knowledge and experiences’ (Devlin, 2013, p. 748).

Responses from research participants indicate that online learning offers a way for this to be achieved: “It taught me that it’s okay to have an opinion, and it’s okay to express it, but you need to do it in a way that is …constructive” (Joanna); “…[t]he [courses] I have been successful at have provided an exciting environment where ideas can be discussed without prejudice or ill-feeling” (Louise). Online learning can meet students where they are currently placed, allowing participation in ways that suit the student considering their individual circumstances and the personal barriers they may have. As Moira shared, “I suffer ill health… I don’t know from one day to the next how I will be feeling. The online courses allow me to pace myself so as to minimise any disruption to my medical treatment”. Amanda, who has bipolar disease, described her experience: “…making [study] work for myself… Getting rid of the idea that I had to do it a certain way and I can’t do it the way I need to do it.”.

Inclusion allows a focus on ‘…the prevention of manifest injustice, rather than seeking the perfectly just’ (Sen, 2009, p. 21). A number of the research participants, particularly those in older age groups, saw the opportunity to attend university online as a way to overcome past barriers to participation. Ayla was previously accepted into university but “finances sent me back to work” (Ayla). Similarly, Amanda commenced
a degree but “…didn’t cope so well. I have mental health issues”. Lina, who lives in a remote area, stated: “I’ve always wanted to do a…degree, ever since I was young, so it’s something that’s been in the back of my mind for a long time. But my circumstances never allowed for me to do that…”.

Marginson (2011, p. 30) asserts that “…integral to the politics of equity is the need to build effective agency in people from groups formerly excluded or under-represented’. The opportunity to build agency through online access to university study allows individuals from these groups to be “empowered and resourced” (p. 30) and freed from a prior sense of educational and personal failure. As Joanna shared, ‘My previous experience [in education] served to silence me...Now...the voice in my head began to be more positive than negative’ (Joanna). After dropping out of TAFE, Daniel “...went into this course expecting to fail. I didn't believe that I could do it” but subsequently achieved high marks in the unit, allowing him to rethink his abilities: “If I can complete this unit, why can’t I complete every other unit in this degree?”.

A capability approach to education and social justice has a focus on the substantive opportunities that students are able to develop (Gale & Molla, 2015). As Sen (2009) notes “…the concept of capability is...closely linked with the opportunity aspect of freedom [and] ...respects our being free to determine what we want, what we value and ultimately what we decide to choose” (p. 232). The research participants valued being able to access and engage with the university learning community partly for the freedom it gave them to be something ‘other’ to the constrained roles of their daily lives. Louise is a carer for members of her family, all of whom have health issues which require significant amounts of her attention, support and time. For her, online study provides relief: “I love studying so much - I’m hoping that it will become an anchor in my life - something I can cling to”. For Melissa, studying at university proved “I’m OK. I’m part of this world. I’m not a housewife that is dated and not in touch with technology…”.

Sen (2009) describes how people “…cherish their ability to reason, appraise, choose, participate and act” (p. 250). In a number of interviews, there was a sense of exhilaration as students felt their university experience activated and enhanced these abilities: “It’s opened a whole new world to me that I didn’t even know existed before I started studying” (Melissa); “I felt empowered...to search for knowledge competently. I no longer find reading academic texts frightening. I love them” (Louise). The capability
perspective allows the intrinsic value of higher education to be seen along with its instrumental value (Gale & Molla, 2015).

Central to this perspective is agency (Wilson-Strydom, 2015) which is ‘at the core of concepts of self’ (Marginson, 2011a, p. 29). Through their studies, successful students experienced a positive change in their self-perceptions by discovering their own capacity to succeed. “I realised that I have more resilience than I gave myself credit for when I was younger” (Amanda). Successful students felt a new capability both in academic and societal terms, allowing a more confident participation and contribution within wider society: “I feel now that I have an opinion, that I have something to say...” (Melissa); “I now see the world through my ‘educated’ lens” (Moira)

Participation in higher education is an opportunity which can promote students’ agency and self-determination (Marginson, 2011b). The emergence of these important educational capacities is strongly apparent in the findings discussed above, which are consistent in depicting a positive experience of personal transformation and empowerment for completing students. The majority of participating students described fundamental shifts in their self-concepts, with greater confidence and self-esteem as a result. In the case of the participants who were successful in completing the unit, it can be argued that their participation in online learning went significantly towards producing some measure social justice in their lives. While students are eager to gain the tools to transform themselves into capable university students, there is still the sense that they are affirmed both in their own identities and for the diverse understandings they bring to their education (Gale, 2012). Joanna, for instance, felt “as though I were an equal, and that I was welcome and my input and my learning were important...that I had as much right to be there as anybody”. This valuable aspect of online learning becomes evident through a focus on their experiences beyond the point of entry as has been the case with this research.

5.5 Conclusion

Online learning plays an important and increasing role in contemporary higher education in Australia and elsewhere, with its capacity to enable participation of many who would otherwise be excluded. Both fairness and inclusion are concepts which are foregrounded in Australian government policies to widen and increase access to higher education, aiming to foster a more socially just society. This is a goal for higher
education widely shared internationally (Jia & Ericson, 2017). As stated by Sen (2009), policies which aim to increase social justice must ‘...be alive to both fairness in the processes involved and to the equity and efficiency of the substantive opportunities people can enjoy’ (p. 296). An exclusive focus on fairness, as determined by the number of equity students represented at enrolment, limits the development of a deeper understanding of the wide benefits equity students can gain from university participation.

The power of online higher education to transform the lives of students from under-represented and disadvantaged backgrounds in substantive and positive ways becomes clear when the focus shifts to their individual experiences. The inclusion model allows this shift. Study options offered through online learning create important avenues to increase participation and facilitate inclusion for a diverse range of students. They allow those prevented from attending campus not only the opportunity to study at university level but also to participate in learning communities that recognise and affirm them. The voices of the successful online students who participated in the case study of ATU100 reveal the high value they placed on these opportunities through which they experienced enhanced self-worth and expanded capabilities. On the other hand, it is clear from the high attrition rate in online units and from the comments of non-completing students from the case study that this positive experience is not shared by all who study online. While further research is needed to gain more understanding of non-completers’ views, it is important that the central place of online learning in fostering inclusion in higher education, and its potential to transform student’s lives, is widely recognised and valued in higher education policies.
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Chapter 6  Article 3

Hidden in Plain Sight: Higher Education’s Paradoxical Non-Rrecognition of Casual Academics and Their Value


- **Research aims addressed:** To gain a deeper understanding of how current trends in higher education are experienced by students and tutors in ATU100. To explore the implications of these experiences in relation to equity and social justice.

- **Major research questions addressed:** What effect does their casual status have on tutors’ capacity to effectively participate in the academic community and find fulfilment in their work, and to assist students to transition to academic life? What does this imply for equity and social justice in the higher education workplace?

- **Research questions specific to the article:** How important is the contribution of casual teaching academics to the higher education sector in Australia? To what extent do the working conditions of casual teaching academics reflect the importance of their contribution? How does this compare to the situation in similar countries?
Hidden in Plain Sight: Higher Education’s Paradoxical Non-Recognition of Casual Academics and Their Value

Abstract: Within Australia and internationally, higher education is an increasingly marketised space. Competition for students and flexible employment practices are two characteristics of the contemporary university in a climate of reduced government funding. The first characteristic sees the expansion of fully online courses as a device for increasing student numbers, including growing numbers of students from ‘non-traditional’ backgrounds. The second propels the global trend towards the casualisation of the academic profession, particularly academic teaching. Many online units are taught almost exclusively by casual staff who have no permanent academic position. It is therefore casual teaching academics who are present in online learning spaces and at the most important interactions with students. There are apparent paradoxes arising from the significant contribution casual academics make to the university when contrasted with the limited contribution, in terms of employment conditions, recognition and inclusion, that universities make to them. This article draws on findings from a qualitative case study of a first-year online unit offered by a large public university through Open Universities Australia. It includes both the student voice, taken from unit evaluation surveys conducted by the university, and the tutor voice, provided through first-hand interviews and questionnaires. What emerges from the findings is the high value placed on tutors by their students and the tutors’ important contribution to student success, contrasted with the low value given to tutors in the contemporary academy and the destructive effect this has on tutors’ professional and personal wellbeing.

6.1 Introduction

Throughout the world, higher education is following certain major trends which present a number of paradoxes. Universities are increasingly adopting practices which originate in the field of business and profit. Terms such as new managerialism (Huang, Pang, & Yu, 2018), corporatisation (Nadolny & Ryan, 2015), marketisation (Guilbault, 2018) and new public management (Ryan et al., 2017) proliferate in the literature on the contemporary university. Higher education is seen as an arena where universities must remain competitive by deploying the marketing techniques and human resource practices of the corporate world to stay ahead. Simultaneously, universities are eager to consolidate their function as institutions which serve the public good (Marginson,
Policies for broadening the range of social levels from which students commonly enter the university are important in this regard, with online learning emerging as an avenue to implement such policies (Stone, 2017). Widening student participation also serves to secure government funding. In Australia and elsewhere in the world, significant amounts of government funding are tied to meeting targets for increasing the enrolment of students from disadvantaged backgrounds (Australian Government, 2009). Expansion of higher education is seen by governments around the world as a way to ensure national competitiveness in the global knowledge economy (Chan, 2017, p. 6). In this way, policies aimed at serving the public good may align with financial policies.

These trends in higher education create significant changes for universities: in the demographic makeup of the student body; in students’ levels of readiness for university study; and in university learning environments and student-teacher interactions. These changes present challenges, with growing numbers of non-traditional students studying off-campus who need to be well supported if they are to succeed in completing their degree. It has been noted that university tutors are significant actors in providing this support through their presence in online learning spaces and at the most important interactions with students (Fırat, 2017; Park, 2015; Stone, 2017). Increasingly, these tutors are likely to be casually employed staff without permanent positions in the academy. There is a consistent global trend towards the casualisation of academic teaching (Stromquist, 2017b, p. 15) propelled by an emphasis on cost-cutting and flexible human resource practices (Rothengatter & Hil, 2013, p. 51).

While it could be argued that financial policies of universities are able to marry with those aimed at improving student equity, the trend towards employing large numbers of casualised university staff produces largely one-sided benefits. These are heavily weighted towards the financial interests of universities and away from the wellbeing of individual tutors, whose work goes largely unseen, unacknowledged and unrewarded in the academy (Rothengatter & Hil, 2013). Given the close involvement of casual tutors in enacting policies for increasing student equity and opportunity, it is paradoxical that the tutors themselves experience conditions within their workplace which are noticeably inequitable and constrained.

This article discusses the paradoxes inherent within contemporary higher education by examining the contribution tutors make to the academy, the employment conditions they experience, and whether contribution and conditions are commensurate. It firstly examines the international literature for trends which have shaped
contemporary higher education and for aspects of these conditions which place casual tutors as important actors. It then draws on findings from a qualitative case study of a first-year online unit offered by a large public university through Open Universities Australia. These findings include both the student voice, taken from unit evaluation surveys conducted by the university, and the tutor voice, provided through first-hand interviews and questionnaires, and indicate that several paradoxes arise from the dichotomy between the high value placed on tutors by their students and the low value given to tutors in the contemporary academy.

6.2 Review of the literature

6.2.1 The shape of contemporary higher education

According to Huang, Pang and Yu (2018, p.154), the ideology of new managerialism emerged from the world of private business to become pervasive in higher education during the 1980s. Its emphasis was on moving ideas about the dominance of management, accountability and market competition into the public service field. These ideas from the world of for-profit corporations have been increasingly applied to higher education and include viewing education as a marketable product and students as consumers. Corporatisation of universities involves the transformation of knowledge from an intrinsic value to an exchangeable product and universities into a brand (Guilbault, 2018, p. 296), and a management focus on ‘…money, markets and efficiencies…’ (Nadolny & Ryan, 2015, p. 144). In this way, higher education is now a highly tradeable commercial service (Chan, 2017, p. 3) open to competition.

In a competitive market, reputation and service delivery are all important and ‘the satisfaction of … students with the “service offering” becomes crucial’ (Nixon, Scullion, & Hearn, 2018, p. 2). The expansion of both domestic and international student markets is emphasised while at the same time effort is focused on delivering the product efficiently and reducing labour costs (Ryan et al., 2017, p 57). A dependence on supply and demand and cost-cutting affects university employment practices (Rothengatter & Hil, 2013, p. 51) and results in a growing underclass of casual academic teachers (Nadolny & Ryan, 2015, p. 144). According to Stromquist (2017a, p. 132), these trends are evident in most countries despite differences in economic conditions.
6.2.2 The influence of government policies and funding

Over recent decades, the tendency of governments globally has been to diminish their investment in social services such as health and education (Stromquist, 2017b, p. 1) with enormous reductions in higher education spending (p. 10). This has increasingly forced universities to ‘…rationalise their budgets and find alternative funding resources’ (Bertrams, 2007, p. 188). Since student fees are the major source of revenue for universities, and teaching students the major marketable product (Ryan et al., 2017, p. 57), reduced government funding fuels market-style competition for enrolments. In countries with static or declining birth rates, universities feel further pressure to secure enrolments from a diminishing population base. One example is Japan where currently ‘almost every student wishing to attend university is given admission’ (Yamada, 2012, p. 83).

Additionally, the Japanese government is funding initiatives aimed at elevating the international competitiveness of Japanese universities, such as offering courses exclusively in English, in order to attract more foreign students (Yamada, 2012, p. 85). In most countries, there is a push for universities to be more international in both content and orientation in order to be ‘successful on the world scale’ (Marginson, 2010, p. 20). This is in line with the prevailing belief that expanding access to higher education is the major way to build capacity and ensure the competitiveness of a nation’s economy (p. 15).

Internationalisation also brings in export revenue. In Australia, international students made up 26.8% of university enrolments in 2016 (Department of Education and Training, 2017a) and provided public universities with earnings of 4.7 billion dollars in 2014 (Norton & Cakitaki, 2016, p. 41). Significant growth in numbers began in the late 1980s when changes in government policy allowed universities to set and keep fees for international students (p. 23). In this sense, many universities in Australia can now be described as global ‘quasi-companies’ (Pucciarelli & Kaplan, 2016, p. 311).

The Australian government also aims to increase participation in higher education for domestic students and targets its funding to universities accordingly. *Transforming Australia’s Higher Education System* was released as a policy document in 2009 and set a target for 40% of all Australians aged 21-35 to have at least a bachelor-degree level qualification by 2025 (Australian Government, 2009, p.12). In 2012, a demand-driven funding system was introduced with the lifting of previously
imposed limits on the number of domestic students able to enrol in bachelor’s degrees at public universities (Kemp & Norton, 2014). This has allowed universities to respond to student demand with the government committing to support all student places through student-based funding (Australian Government, 2009, p. 17).

While there have been a long series of government funding cuts to Australian higher education since 1986 (Ryan et al., 2017, p. 57), set portions of the funding that is available is targeted towards increasing student enrolments. This is in line with government positions in most industrialised countries, which emphasise the need to ensure their populations are equipped to compete in the global knowledge economy through university education (Mok & Jiang, 2017). This emphasis on expanding student numbers, both domestic and international, produces intense competition between universities (Probert, 2016, p. 2) and further propels a culture of marketisation within higher education.

The push for increased enrolments in higher education can work to allow the opportunity of a university education for students who may previously have been excluded. Jia and Ericson (2017, p. 97) propose that equality of educational opportunity is almost universally regarded as a preeminent moral and social good. Affirmation of the equity principle in higher education is a major international trend (Goastellec, 2008, p. 71) with higher education’s contribution to the social good legitimised through the expansion of university enrolments to include those from non-traditional and disadvantaged backgrounds. An example of this is the Bologna Process in Europe, through which the London Communique of 2007 explicitly reinforced higher education’s role in reducing social inequalities (Goastellec, 2012, p. 497). Similarly, in South Africa from the early 1990s onwards, successive government policies have emphasised ‘increasing and broadening access to university study as one aspect of a strong focus on the redress of past inequalities’ (Wilson-Strydom, 2015, p. 144).

In Australia, the equity principle is echoed in Transforming Australia’s Higher Education System as a commitment to “provide opportunities for all capable people from all backgrounds to participate to their full potential and be supported to do so” (Australian Government, 2009, p. 7). To this end, it sets out a goal for 20% of university students to be taken from the lowest SES category by 2020 and incentivises universities to meet this goal through targeted funding. With changes in government since 2013 this goal has been under threat but an emphasis on specific funding for low SES students has
so far survived in Australian higher education policy (Department of Education and Training, 2017b).

6.2.3 The place of online learning

Online learning is tightly linked to the equity principle in higher education, providing students who are unable to attend campus a means to access university learning. This includes students who need to maintain a fulltime income, students with disabilities, and those living in regional and remote locations. Many of the students who choose to study online fall into Australian government categories of disadvantage (Stone, 2017, p. 13), allowing eligibility for the targeted equity funding outlined above. Online learning also provides new channels for student growth overall (Pucciarelli & Kaplan, 2016, p. 315). In 2016, 27.2% of all Australian university students studied at least part of their degree online (Department of Education and Training, 2017a). Furthermore, platforms such as Open Universities Australia (OUA) enable universities to deliver their degree programs online across four study periods per year, which increases the timeframe that students can undertake courses. The availability of online learning can therefore be seen as playing a role in contributing to university income.

Further, delivery of learning through technology enhances a university’s reputation for innovativeness. This is important for marketing and branding as innovative use of technology allows universities to position themselves favourably for tech-savvy students (Pucciarelli & Kaplan, 2016, p. 315). As Firat (2017, p. 178) states, ‘universities intending to provide large-scale education services for more students, [and] to open up to international markets… have realised the critical importance of open and distance education…”. Government policies and funding produce a competitive drive to expand student numbers at universities and online learning has emerged as a means to implement such an expansion.

6.2.4 Non-traditional, online students

While policies for widening student participation encourage growth in student numbers, there is also concern that attrition rates for both online and non-traditional students are higher than average (Stone, 2017, p. 13-14). Policies that link government funding to student performance indicators such as graduation rates have been promoted as one solution. In the United States, many states have formal commitments in place ‘…to pursue a higher education agenda that includes performance funding and other results-orientated efforts’ (Rutherford & Rabovsky, 2014, p. 187). In Australia, the
government has been signalling that policies may be introduced to link funding to students’ successful course completion and graduate outcomes such as employability (Harvey, 2017). This makes the support and retention of these students of high significance to universities (Adams, Banks, Davis, & Dickson, 2010, p. 15).

Academic teachers play a key role in this. Beer and Lawson (2017, p. 778) found that lack of academic support was the most important factor within institutional control that contributed to students’ departure decisions. Gilardi and Guglielmetti (2011, p. 48) found that building relationships and personal engagement with teaching staff leads to higher retention rates for non-traditional students. Specifically, in online learning environments, the pedagogical and technical support needed by new-to-university students makes skilled teacher facilitation crucial (Park, 2015, p. 17).

6.2.5 Casualisation

With so much at stake for universities and the high incentives to ensure quality in the student experience, one would think that there would be a strong willingness on the part of universities to invest in the teaching staff who are most involved in student interactions. However, it appears that the opposite is the case. Little commitment to casual academic teachers is shown and, far from having a central place in the university, they are placed at the margins. Academic teachers seem to be particularly affected by the atmosphere of ‘uncertainty and austerity’ (Chan, 2017, p. 5) that has crept into the academic workforce, with a large percentage being excluded from permanency and employed on a casual basis. Despite the equity principle propounded by universities in relation to students, the same principle is not extended to casual teaching staff (Stromquist, 2017b, p. 2). By and large, the literature within the last decade continues to describe lamentable conditions characterised by marginalisation, stigmatisation and uncertainty (cf. Rothengatter & Hil, 2013; Nadolny & Ryan, 2015; Stromquist, 2017b; Barcan, 2018 etc). The ‘enormous growth’ of casual teaching academics is an indicator of both the pressure to minimise costs in the higher education sector as well as the tendency to minimise the role of teaching (Probert, 2016, p. 9).

On a headcount basis casual academics make up the majority of academic staff at Australian universities and are largely employed at the most junior level (Norton & Cakitaki, 2016, p. 34). In the U.S., the proportion of casual staff in the professoriate rose from 21.7 percent in 1967 to almost 70% in 2014 (Kezar & Maxey, 2013). These are the highest rates of academic casualisation in the world. There are concerns
expressed in the literature regarding perceived risks to the quality of university teaching
due to the large numbers of non-permanent staff involved (Ryan et al., 2017, p. 66).
However, in Australia overall student satisfaction has risen consistently over the past
two decades. Baik, Naylor and Arkoudis (2015, p. 2) note that student perceptions of
teaching quality have improved considerably since 1994 across five indicators including
staff enthusiasm, feedback provision and engaging teaching styles.

In the competitive higher education market detailed above, the ability to hire and
fire casual academics at will is seen as an advantage by university management, giving
them the ability to respond to the market and fluctuations in student demand (Southall,
2017, p. 469). However, Stromquist (2017a, p. 11) states that the emotional cost and
stress placed on academic teachers as a result of these practices is not sufficiently
documented. In Australia and elsewhere, it is unfortunate that, “despite much hand-
wringing about casualisation, there has been little by way of a serious policy response”
(Probert, 2016, p. 9).

6.3 The Case Study

To extend the discussion above, this article utilises findings derived from a case
study which explored the learning and teaching conditions that contemporary trends in
higher education have produced, and how these conditions are experienced. The specific
trends examined were: (a): widening student participation; (b): flexible online delivery;
and (c): casualisation of academic teaching. The case study focuses on a first-year core
unit offered online by a large public university through Open Universities Australia
(OUA). The unit was identified as a representative microcosm of the conditions
produced by the three trends, lending itself well to instrumental case study methodology
in which the case serves the purpose of illuminating our understanding of wider issues
(Stake, 2005, p. 445). Units offered through OUA have a flexible, online structure
enabling access for students from diverse backgrounds and in diverse circumstances.
Further, up to 100% of the focus unit teaching staff are casual tutors. This places the
unit at the nexus of the three trends.

For this article, the case study is approached with the following questions in mind in
order to more fully explore the issues raised in the preceding sections.

- How important is the contribution of casual teaching academics to the higher
education sector in Australia?
• To what extent are the employment conditions of casual teaching academics commensurate to their contribution?

Given the similarity of the pressures faced in Australian higher education to those faced more widely internationally, as discussed above, this exploration is likely to have wider international relevance.

6.4 Research Methods

This article draws on an analysis of formal student evaluations of the focus unit conducted by the university, as well as in-depth interviews with tutors who taught the unit. The student evaluations cover eight OUA study periods from across 2015 to 2016. A quasi-statistical analysis (Maxwell, 2010) was applied to quantitative and qualitative responses to reveal the number and type of responses related directly to tutors and to aspects of teaching and learning. This evidence from the student perspective was juxtaposed with data from in-depth interviews and questionnaires with seven tutors who taught in the unit at different stages over the same period. The small tutor sample size has allowed the foregrounding of each tutor’s voice to provide an in-depth account of his or her individual experiences of both teaching in the unit and of the employment conditions causal status entails.

This aspect of the research aligns with qualitative/interpretative research methodology which may involve small numbers of participants to achieve in-depth explorations and understandings of a central phenomenon that they experience (Creswell, 2008, p. 5). Following the “micro-macro link” (Gerring, 2007, p. 1) implicit in instrumental case study research, this small sample size may also illuminate our understanding of wider higher education concerns. Taken together, these interviews reveal working conditions and treatment in the workplace which are indicative of a low value placed on casual academics by the university. This is paradoxical to the high regard tutors apparently receive from their students. These two aspects of the case study are further detailed below.

6.5 Analysis and Results

6.5.1 Students’ perceptions of tutors

Formal student evaluations of the unit were analysed to ascertain the value of the tutors’ contribution to higher education through the student voice. The evaluation
surveys were used with permission from the university which delivers the unit. Student survey results were anonymous and the copies used for this research were de-identified of all tutors’ names prior to researcher access. The student evaluation surveys included here contain responses from a total of 640 OUA students. A quantitative element of the survey results consists of a number of statements with Likert scale responses with percentage of agreement across all participating students. Of these, three were directed towards teaching and learning aspects of the student experience. All three show a high percentage of agreement when averaged across the 8 study periods: Learning Experiences at 89.3%, Feedback at 88.6%, and Quality of Teaching at 87.4%. Students largely found these aspects helpful to their achievements in the unit.

The qualitative element of the surveys consisted of open responses to two generalised questions concerning which aspects of the unit were most helpful and what needed most improvement. Neither of these questions explicitly mentioned tutors or aspects of teaching. Responses containing reference to the tutor or to feedback were identified and counted as relating directly to tutor contribution. The number of responses which mention tutor contribution and other aspects of teaching and learning were totalled across the surveys and their percentage of all comments was calculated as shown below.

| Comments about teaching and learning aspects taken together: 739: 73.1% |
|-------------------|-----------------|
| Comments about:   | Percentage      |
| tutor or direct aspect of tutor’s teaching (feedback)= 430: 42.5% |
| learning management system= 45: 4.5% |
| real-time conferencing sessions= 42: 4.2% |
| discussion board= 75: 7.4% |
| other students= 55: 5.4% |
| weekly study guides= 75: 7.4% |
| unit outline= 17: 1.7% |

It is clear that comments related to the contribution of tutors to the students’ experience of the unit far outweighed comments on any other aspect of teaching and learning and occupied a significant percentage of all comments taken together. This indicates that tutors played a prominent role in students’ experience of the unit and made a significant contribution to student satisfaction. This is supported by the fact that
positive comments about tutors and their teaching make up 32.8% of all qualitative comments given (n=1011), 44.9% of all comments about teaching and learning (n=739), and 63.7% of all positive comments about teaching and learning (n=521). The highest figure for positive tutor contribution was 45.8% of all qualitative comments (n=49) in a specific study period.

To gain more insight into students’ perceptions of their tutors, word clusters were developed and categorised based on the number and types of comments about a tutor or a direct aspect of teaching given in the surveys. The category ‘communication with students’ drew the highest number of positive comments (n=254), with three large word clusters forming around tutors being: available (responsive, prompt, committed, engaged, etc.); helpful (insightful comments, knowledgeable, clear explanations, constructive, etc.); and motivating (encouraging, inspiring, mentor, support, etc.). Longer quotes within this category show that tutor communication was integral to some students’ retention in the unit. These include phrases such as: motivation to finish; integral to success; helped to complete unit; helped to continue.

‘Feedback’ was another category with a high number of positive comments (n= 169). Word clusters in this category formed around feedback being: helpful (useful, valuable, etc.); great (exceptional, amazing, etc.); constructive (insightful, extensive, etc.); learn a lot (understand, build confidence, etc); and timely (regular, quick, etc.). Positive comments in the category ‘tutor attributes’ (n= 86) involved two word clusters: fantastic (brilliant, awesome, amazing, etc.); and professional (open, welcoming, personable).

Negative comments were also analysed and seemed to have been given where students felt a lack of the positive elements listed above. Negative word clusters about ‘communication with students’ (n=40) included: lacking; not helpful; more detail; more support. Negative clusters associated with ‘feedback’ (n=41) included: very little, not constructive, and faster. Only five negative comments overall were given on tutor attributes. It appears that tutor presence and interaction was highly appreciated by students, and where it was seen to be lacking, this was keenly felt.

6.5.2 Tutors’ experience

Seven tutors were invited to participate in the case study. For ethical reasons, their participation occurred during study periods in which they were not teaching the unit, within the active research period from 2014 to 2016. Tutors were assured that their
participation was completely anonymous and would not affect their employment in any way. Real names of tutors have not been used in any aspect of the research outputs. An information letter, consent form and a list of guiding questions to be used in the interviews were sent to participants by email. One tutor’s participation consisted of written responses to these qualitative questions. The remaining six tutors were interviewed for between 55 to 90 minutes across one or two sessions, which were recorded. The interviews were transcribed and together with the questionnaire responses, quotes which demonstrated commonality were identified and grouped under 24 codes. These codes were refined and abstracted to five themes. Themes and codes were sent to the tutor participants for member checking to add trustworthiness. The final five themes are listed as follows and discussed further below.

- Negligible involvement in the academy
- Challenges and rewards of teaching non-traditional OUA students
- Specific characteristics of online teaching
- Lack of preparation for online teaching but quality of teaching remains high.
- Negative effects of unstable and insecure working conditions

6.5.3 Negligible involvement in the academy

All the tutors were very clear that their casual status rendered them absent from participation in the academy beyond direct teaching and marking activities. They noted the lack of consistent presence on campus and of access to adequate facilities that they experience.

The lack of office space on campus adversely affects my ability to tutor. Not having a room where my students can find me. Not having a room where I can talk confidentially to my students… [Cody]

As a casual teaching academic, I don’t currently have an office… mainly I’m off campus so most of my work feels a little bit dissociated from the main work of the university… [Bruno]

There was certainly a desire for more connection to colleagues and for formal and informal opportunities to share ideas, reflect on and discuss experiences, get support, and build knowledge collaboratively with their peers. Tutors also saw the need for professional development and channels through which to offer feedback and contribute to the unit, but noted that these were almost completely non-existent:
I think it would be nice... just to have opportunities where we can just get together, or a little meeting space somewhere... just go through some ideas or go through some things that we think [could] work. [Michelle]

I feel it is really important that colleagues can chat with each other just on a support level. [Kristy]

I do think we need professional development. [Cody]

No, nothing. There’s no professional development opportunities. [Michelle]

6.5.4 Challenges and rewards of teaching non-traditional OUA students

The lack of collegial involvement and professional support is particularly problematic in view of the unique challenges that come with teaching non-traditional students in a unit which is often the first that students take towards their degrees. All tutors regarded the unit as complex and difficult to teach, particularly in the online learning space:

[The focus unit was] demanding on many, many levels... Theoretical and practical content is both very high... Assessments are continuous and complicated... The challenge for me was huge to start with. [Kristy]

This was related to the broader challenges associated with widening student participation and the related need for units designed to transition students into higher education and ensure they are equipped for university level study. Tutors saw teaching such units as demanding and the student cohort as extremely diverse, with complex challenges to overcome in order to succeed in their studies:

... I think it’s hard for any academic to teach [this] kind of thing because part of the [focus unit] really is a way of redressing the enormous problem posed by having increased, expanded university enrolments. [Bruno]

We seem to have a fairly high percentage of people who have anxiety disorders or some sort of social anxieties...and struggle with discussing things with people... [Lydia]

Some of these students...do have mountains, some of them aren’t just molehills. [Lily]
Despite these extra demands, tutors appreciated the richness of life experience, maturity and self-directedness that non-traditional students can bring to their learning.

They have very rich experience that they bring with them and often with a lot to offer in terms of their ability to communicate and to help each other, so it’s like an ideal classroom. [Cody]

**6.5.5 Specific characteristics of online tutoring**

Tutors felt that there was a higher workload associated with online tutoring. Online students were more demanding of their time and expected a high degree of access to tutors:

A huge amount of emails usually coming in and lots of conflicting demands in terms of…student requests. [Michelle]

In the first few weeks students are just so demanding…in terms of what they need explained to them about how to approach anything, about where to find things or how to do whatever. [Lydia]

The online space required different ways of communicating and interacting with students, which could be more difficult but could also create opportunities for richer student/tutor and student/student collaboration:

I don’t have that detailed information I can get from life reading a classroom. I have to rely on the students saying to me... “I don’t know how to respond, I don’t know how to phrase the answer. [Cody]

In a way its feels like a much deeper and richer and more direct teaching experience to me than internal classes do…I also can cater the comments that I make…to what it is that they need and so between us we come to an understanding of what their questions are and also how they can be addressed. [Lydia]

**6.5.6 Lack of preparation for online teaching but quality remains high**

There appears to be an absence of substantial preparation or ongoing training for online tutoring work. Tutors were given little to nothing in the way of training to transfer their teaching skills from the physical classroom to the online learning space. While there was mention of some paid induction for tutors in the focus unit once per year, those who begin teaching in later study periods don’t have the opportunity to
participate and the needs of online tutors are not specifically addressed. There is a sense of being thrown into the deep end when commencing online work:

No, we are not given any training. I don’t know why. I’ve asked for training…three emails from me [to head of department] went unanswered… that was disappointing. [Bruno]

No one even showed me. I just kind of went into it by myself and started looking around and navigating and worked it out by myself… We never got any training in terms of how to respond to certain things and what the expectations were… [Michelle]

Under these circumstance, it is commendable that tutors show considerable goodwill within their work to develop expertise and effectiveness within the complexities of online teaching and to give a high level of support and guidance to their students.

You need to be present, you need to be engaged and you need to be responsive back and forth… students really need us to be in there and sometimes it’s just a friendly voice… the input is essential. [Lydia]

As indicated in the findings of this study, in some cases this goodwill and support from tutors is what enabled students to get through the unit.

6.5.7 Negative effects of unstable and insecure working conditions

It is clear through the interviews that all the tutors appreciated the flexibility of casual academic work, but this is largely where appreciation for their casual status ended. Many aspects of casual academic work had an adverse impact on tutors personally and professionally. Tutors expressed a lack of fulfilment in their professional experience as well as a sense of being marginalised and invisible within the academy.

It can be quite a solitary thing, being a casual tutor… it can sometimes feel like you’re at the whim of the whole system… [Michelle]

Somewhere in my mind… I feel I’m not quite part of the university. [Bruno]

It does make you feel less and less valued. [Kristy]

I don’t feel like, in any way, we are…highly valued. [Cody]

It was felt that the university processes and systems under which casual tutors work were arbitrary and unconducive to wellbeing. As shown in the quotes below, there was
an ongoing uncertainty as to whether continuing work would be available and often tutors had very little notice of work offered. This had a negative impact on tutors’ financial wellbeing and created an ongoing need to prove themselves. When work was available, some tutors felt it necessary to take on a large number of classes to make up full time hours. Tutors also noted a system of patronage for gaining work which seemed to bear little relationship to tutors’ abilities or experience. As a consequence, tutors felt powerless to control their own employment prospects. Added to the demanding nature of the focus unit discussed above, these conditions produced an overall difficult experience for tutors. It was also felt that the difficulties of their professional experiences were ignored by the university.

Between one semester and the next I don’t know if I’m going to have zero hours work, I don’t know if I’ll have three, six, ten or twenty. There is nothing I can plan or do... [Kristy]

Ongoing uncertainty of regular...work...makes it very hard, if not impossible, to survive financially. Both this financial uncertainty, and overload of work takes its toll on one’s personal life. [Eddie]

You probably tend to over-extend yourself in order to not jeopardise your job. That leads to a lot of stress I think and yet you’re not able to really talk to anyone. [Michelle]

With the load of expected duties, I have felt at times like I am completely overloaded and overwhelmed. [Eddie]

“[It would be nice if there was] … just a sense that the tutors are a bit more looked after and there’s a bit more thought put into [it] because they make up such a large part of the units and the support that those units receive [Michelle].

Tutors felt that the work they undertook as casual academics was valuable to their students and to the wider university but that it was not regarded as such. Therefore, they could not foresee a career path arising from casual academic teaching.

I feel like we’re the checkout chicks of the education system. We’re casual employees. We’re interchangeable. Essentially disposable. [Cody]
6.6 Discussion of the Paradoxes

The findings detailed above are indicative of a paradoxical situation. A paradox involves self-contradictions, inconsistencies and anomalies. There are clearly some elements which emerge from these findings to fit this description. There is an apparent disconnect between the high value placed on tutors by students and the low value placed on tutors by the university. From the focus unit evaluation surveys, it is strongly apparent that students regarded their tutors as important to their learning. The high number of responses related to tutor contribution indicate that this was at the foreground of the students’ university experience. There was a feeling of warm appreciation conveyed through the choice of words in many of the survey responses and a sense that the feedback, motivation, encouragement and support received from tutors was highly appreciated. This is contrasted to lack of regard from the university that emerges from the tutor interviews. Tutors felt that their presence was marginalised, and their input within the learning spaces of the university, particular within online delivery, gained little notice from the university that delivers the unit. Paradoxically, it is the university itself that conducts evaluation surveys at the end of each study period and has full access to students’ remarks.

As discussed in the literature above, student satisfaction and retention are important concerns in the current competitive environment at universities. Students are an important source of revenue through their tuition fees (Ryan et al., 2017). At the same time, increasing the participation of students from disadvantaged backgrounds attracts targeted government funding and enhances universities’ reputations (Jia & Ericson, 2017). It seems contradictory, then, that students’ power as customers (Guilbault, 2018) seems to have little effect when it comes to resourcing one aspect of their university experience which appears to be highly important to them, their tutors. Instead of universities investing in and developing academic teaching staff, tutors’ comments indicated that as little time and money is expended on their development as possible. Tutors were not given opportunities for paid professional training, nor did they have the opportunity to interact or collaborate with their peers and the wider academic community. Office space and phone lines were also hard to come by. Tutors reported that these conditions affected their ability to teach.

A further paradox arises, then, from the fact that tutors faced with such difficult conditions were able to produce high quality teaching and to give generously to their
students. For the most part, the student evaluations analysed here were highly positive regarding the quality of tutors’ contributions. The tutor interviews revealed that they expended considerable time and effort to ensure that they offered a quality learning experience to their students. Tutors’ continued dedication to their teaching despite the working conditions they experienced may be explained by the concept of academic vocation. Barcan’s 2018 study found that participants from across academia were unequivocal in affirming that they “considered academic work to be a vocation” (Barcan, 2018, p. 111). Sacrifice and service are central to the idea of vocational work (p. 112), and it appears that the university implicitly relies on these elements to ensure quality in teaching, rather than the provision of support and resources. A “deep intermeshing of personal satisfaction with an ethic of service [is] intrinsic to vocation” (Barcan, 2018, p. 112). It appears that the tutors could access these qualities within their work despite the difficult conditions they described.

It does not reflect well on universities that what appear to be unfair staffing practices exist within “a culture of institutional compliance and acquiescence” (Rothengatter & Hil, 2013, p. 54). Boyce, Ryan, Imus and Morgeson (2007, p. 11) note where workers’ non-permanent status is more visible, they are more likely to experience stigmatisation. The casual tutors in the case study keenly felt their different status to their permanent colleagues suggesting a high degree of stigmatisation. A sense of injustice comes through in their interviews as they describe experiences of exclusion and invisibility within their work. Kezar and Maxey (2014, p. 34) explain unjust work practices in higher education as “troubling ethical lapses”. In the marketised university, managers tend to see decisions based on cost reduction and workplace flexibility as neutral, blinding them to ethical concerns such as “equity, justice, or the needs…of others” (Gioia, as cited in Kezar & Maxey, 2014, p. 34). To management, such issues would only be of concern if they had a detrimental effect on their university’s core business. In this way, carrying out excellent teaching may not be in the tutors’ best interest in regards to improving their working conditions. Here we have a further paradox.

6.7 Conclusion

This article has looked at a distinct group of university tutors through an exploration of the contemporary higher education climate, the student view, and the view of the tutors themselves. The literature review showed that new managerialism in higher education has been widely adopted globally and is characterised by reduced
government investment, an increase in the marketisation of knowledge as a product, and the positioning of students as consumers. In order to generate revenue and cut costs, universities engage in competition for students and adopt flexible human resources practices which propel the casualisation of academic teaching. At the same time, the numbers of non-traditional students have grown in response to targeted government funding. Online learning is a mode of delivery which has helped facilitate this growth. Casual academic tutors play an important role in the retention of both non-traditional and online students.

The student view, gained through an analysis of the evaluation surveys completed by students in a first-year, online unit in Australia, indicates that they give high value to their tutors and that tutors provide high quality feedback, guidance and support. In this way it can be ascertained that the contribution of casual academics to higher education in Australia is an important one. The tutor view was obtained through qualitative interviews with tutors who taught in the same unit. What emerges through the tutor voice is that they experience a working environment characterised by poor and insecure conditions, a lack of financial stability, and exclusion. This is not commensurate to the significance of their contribution, highlighting a paradox in higher education. While there are elements of the paradox that can be explained, as outlined above, these explanations do little to resolve the paradox. The unfortunate reality is that this paradoxical situation at universities appears to be entrenched in the current system into the foreseeable future.
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Chapter 7  Summary of Findings

This section draws together the findings of each of the research phases which comprise the case study. These findings were derived from the codes and themes that were the outcome from the empirical data gathered through interviews, questionnaires and document analysis carried out across the three phases (see Appendix C), together with the external data sources outlined in the research design section above. The findings for each phase are listed and discussed in the three articles contained herein. Each research phase focused on a different aspect of the experience of teaching and learning in a contemporary higher education climate affected by the major trends foregrounded in this study; widening student participation, flexible online delivery, and casualisation of academic teaching. Each phase produced significant findings regarding, 1) the contrasting experiences of the students and tutors who participated in the research, 2) the contribution to student equity and social justice provided by online access, and 3) the professional conditions experienced by the tutor participants. The data and findings are presented comprehensively in the articles included above. Below is a summary of the major findings related to each the phases.

7.1 The Differing Experience of Students and Tutors

The first phase of the study addressed research aim 1 and research question 1a, and looked at the experiences of both students and tutors. Much of the literature was predictive of a difficult and challenging experience for both. It was expected that the combination of being both a non-traditional and online student would intensify the challenges for ATU100 students. The literature showed non-traditional students were likely to be unprepared for university level study, requiring higher levels of academic support (Bradley et al., 2008) and needing to overcome feelings of low self-belief and intimidation produced by a lack of familiarity with the culture of the university (Yorke & Longden, 2004; Mcinnis & James, 2004). The challenging technological requirements of online learning (Bach et al., 2007) as well as the higher than average attrition rate for online students (Cupitt & Golshan, 2015) were also emphasised. The literature relating to the experience of the tutors centred around their secondary status within the academy (Ryan et al., 2011), their exclusion from professional development opportunities and collegial relationships (Percy & Beaumont, 2008; Gottschalk & McEachern, 2010), the ongoing uncertainty of their employment (Brown et al., 2010), and financial insecurity (Junor, 2003).
Overall, while the findings for the tutors seemed consistent with the literature, the student findings differed. The three students interviewed in this phase were positive about their experience in the unit and were appreciative of the opportunity to enter higher education provided by online delivery. While they all outlined challenges, they were clear in asserting that these were successfully overcome, allowing them to experience positive transformations in their self-perceptions and to gain greater confidence for participating in university study and in the wider community. Students indicated that personal determination was a key factor for their success in the unit, but they all attributed importance to the support provided by their tutors. It should be noted that the students in this phase were all mature-aged females who had barriers to their participation on campus, had been away from study for some time, and who successfully completed the unit.

The tutors interviewed were far more negative about their experience in the unit and the university workplace more generally. They revealed little to no professional training for teaching in online spaces, limited support, limited access to university resources such as office space, a lack of security, and the ongoing negative impact these conditions had on their financial and personal wellbeing.

These positive findings from the student data juxtaposed with the negative results from the tutors guided decisions for the focus of the two subsequent research phases. For the second phase, the social justice implications of widening student participation through online learning were explored with expanded data from student participants. Within the context of higher education globally, the third phase compared the contribution casual tutors make to higher education with the contribution, in terms of professional conditions and inclusion, that universities as employers make to them.

7.2 The Contribution of Online Learning to Student Equity and Social Justice

The second research phase was concerned with research aims 1 and 2, and addressed research questions 2a and 2b. It looked more closely at the idea that social justice is furthered through the access to university study that online delivery provides to students in diverse circumstances. This was indicated by the positive findings for students in the initial phase of the research. Social justice concepts such as equity and inclusion were examined in the context of Australian government policies aimed at widening access to higher education to include people from disadvantaged social groups who have not traditionally participated in university study. These Australian policies are
in line with international trends (Jia & Ericson, 2017) where expanding higher education is seen as a way to promote national economic competitiveness (Yonezawa, Kitamura, Meerman, & Kuroda, 2014) and to further equitable social development (Wilson-Strydom, 2015). Disadvantaged groups include; low socio-economic (SES) status; rural and remote; and disabled students (Downing, 2017). It has been noted that these students are highly represented in online units (Stone et al., 2016). The positive experiences related by the three students in phase one of the study were therefore of interest in this wider context.

In phase two, the study was expanded to include a further nine students who had participated in ATU100 in recent study periods, to bring the total number of student participants to 12. There was an attempt to broaden the range of students to include the perspectives of non-completing students, younger students and males. All in all, two non-completers, one female school-leaver, and one male student participated in research. The remaining participants were mature-aged females who had completed the unit successfully. The range of data sources was also extended to include a follow-up survey and an analysis of reflective journals which were competed as an assignment during the unit. This wider research group confirmed the findings from the first stage and continued the narrative of transformation and empowerment through online higher education that had emerged previously. Findings demonstrated the importance of online delivery as a gateway to university study as all participants indicated that their study would not otherwise be possible.

Overall, students felt part of a supportive, interactive learning community within the online learning space. Students were enthusiastic about ATU100 after completion and felt that their study had changed their self-perceptions and transformed their thinking in positive ways. While it should be noted that the difficulty in securing substantial participation by non-completers could serve to exclude their experiences from these findings, what emerged in this phase of the research supported the idea that access to university study through online learning can further social justice.

This idea was further explored by foregrounding the writings of Amartya Sen on social justice. Sen discusses two differing and somewhat conflicting theoretical models for social justice; fairness and inclusion (Sen, 2009). These were related to Australian government higher education policy. On the one hand the fairness model is promoted in policy through increasing the percentage representation of disadvantaged students in
university enrolments. On the other hand, inclusion is promoted through increasing the overall participation of young Australians in higher education, with expansion in the numbers of disadvantaged students as a result (Marginson, 2011b).

Sen (2009) criticises the fairness model of social justice as being overly focused on institutional characteristics that obscure the diverse ways justice is experienced by individuals. He places more value on the inclusion model which emphasises seeing people’s lives inclusively with the substantive freedoms and actual capabilities they have gained. While online learning was shown to contribute substantially to both these social justice models, the transformative qualities of the student findings were better explained through the inclusion model.

7.3 The Difficult Employment Conditions of Casual Tutors

Phase 3 of the research focused on research questions 3a and 3b which address the tutor experience. In this phase, the three major trends foregrounded throughout the study were examined within the broader international higher education context.

Through the literature, new managerialism was identified as the pervasive ideology in higher education globally. This sees the application of the management and marketing techniques of private business to public and social organisations such as universities (Huang et al., 2018). Reduced funding from governments is an aspect of new managerialism being widely felt in higher education institutes worldwide (Stromquist, 2017b). In response, universities have become increasingly corporatised, marketised and competitive with a push to increase profits and reduce costs. Widening student participation and flexible online learning largely contribute to increasing profits, while the casualisation of academic teaching is adopted to reduce costs.

Phase 3 problematised the effectiveness and ethics of this model by endeavouring to demonstrate the substantial contribution academic tutors make to the quality of the teaching and learning in universities, and contrasting this to the contributions that universities make to casual tutors in terms of their professional conditions. To do this, this phase included an analysis of the formal student evaluation surveys on ATU100 conducted by the university over a two-year period, and expanded the tutor interview data by including a further four tutor research participants.

Within a marketised higher education climate, widening the participation of students operates in two major ways. Firstly, student tuition fees are the major source of
income for universities. As such, students are regarded as the prime consumers of the marketable university product (Guilbault, 2018). This leads to a high importance placed on student satisfaction in the marketised university (Nixon et al., 2018). Widening student participation is also seen playing a major role in building a nation’s capacity to compete on the world stage (Marginson, 2010), as well as fostering an equitable society (Goastellec, 2012). In Australia and elsewhere, a significant proportion of government funding is tied to universities’ success in enrolling and, in some cases, retaining non-traditional students (Rutherford & Rabovsky, 2014). Online learning has become an important vehicle for expanding student numbers and for marketing a university’s technological edge (Fırat, 2017). In all this, casual academic tutors play a key role in ensuring that students are well-supported and receive quality in their learning experiences (Park, 2015). Failure in this regard can have significant ramifications for the university.

Findings from an analysis of unit evaluation surveys of ATU100 conducted by the university indicated that tutors were highly valued and appreciated by online students. The eight evaluation surveys analysed covered a two-year period and involved a total of 640 students. Quantitative and qualitative responses indicated that tutors play a prominent role in the student experience in ATU100 with a high percentage of positive comments about the quality of tutors’ feedback, their support and guidance.

This is contrasted with the tutors’ depiction of the quality of their working conditions in the unit and in the university workplace more generally. Interview responses from seven tutors provided insight into their professional experiences, with the small sample size giving prominence to their individual voices. The research depended on the micro-macro link in qualitative case study research and the prevalence of similar narratives in the literature to give their voices relevance in the wider discussion of higher education. Tutors reported a lack of involvement in the academic community and in the mechanisms for providing feedback on, or contributing to the development the unit. They described professional development opportunities as limited or absent. Although they described the online learning space as challenging in terms of technological and pedagogical complexities and student diversity, specific training in online teaching was lacking. A toll on the financial and personal wellbeing of tutors, including their physical and mental health, was apparent in the findings.

A number of paradoxes emerged from the findings in phase 3. The importance
of the student experience to the university was juxtaposed with the reluctance of the university to invest in the tutors, who were shown to be a resource highly valued by online students. The difficult conditions tutors faced were contrasted with their ability to produce high quality and supportive learning environments for their students. Finally, the discourse of equality and inclusion directed at students was contrasted with the ‘ethical lapses’ (Kezar & Maxey, 2014b) that universities demonstrate in their paradoxical lack of regard towards the inequitable working conditions of casual tutors.
Chapter 8  Discussion of Major Findings and Implications

The research aims underpinning this case study were: 1) to gain a deeper understanding of how current trends in higher education are influencing the teaching and learning experienced by the non-traditional students and casual academic tutors in ATU100 within the online learning space; and 2) to explore the implications of these experiences in relation to equity and social justice. The aims of the study were satisfactorily met through the three articles which make up this thesis, by foregrounding participants’ voices in relating their own experiences, underpinning these findings through triangulation of the data, and relating the findings to the literature. The current trends foregrounded in the study were; the widening of student participation to include underrepresented and non-traditional students, the expansion of flexible, online modes of delivery, and the increasing casualisation of the academic teaching profession. These trends emerge within the contemporary, international higher education climate of new managerialism, financial austerity (Chan, 2017) and marketisation. ATU100 provided a site where these trends and how they affected the research participants could be explored.

The following section presents a discussion of the research findings related to the three trends as they overlap and interact with each other, and finishes with recommendations for further research.

8.1 Students

The Australian government is in line with international trends in its adoption of higher education policies aimed at widening student participation in university study. This research started with the premise that students who have entered university as a result of policies to widen student participation were placed on the edge of academe, particularly those studying via online, open access delivery. These students are more likely to be within certain categories of disadvantage in that they may come from social groups not traditionally associated with tertiary level study (Stone, 2017). This, coupled with the possible isolation arising from online studies, was expected to produce a marginalised group of students beset with difficulties. The majority of the ATU100 students who participated in this research did not conform with these expectations. While it needs to be remembered that this research sample of online students was very small, the findings here show that it is certainly possible for non-traditional, online
students to feel a sense of belonging and inclusion in an academic learning community and to experience very positive outcomes from their study.

The research findings indicate that university-level study contributes to the furthering of social justice within the lives of some students from non-traditional backgrounds who accessed higher education through online learning. The majority of the research participants experienced positive transformations in their self-perceptions as a result of the opportunity to enter university that online delivery provided. They gained greater self-esteem, and felt more self-confidence as people who were capable both in the academy and in their daily lives. Data from unit evaluation surveys indicated that tutors play an important and positive role in students’ experiences.

These aspects of the research align with characteristics of social justice put forward in the writings of Amartya Sen (2009). Sen emphasises the benefits of social justice in terms of individual capabilities, substantive opportunities and freedom. According to Wilson-Strydom (2015, p. 150) “[t]he capabilities approach takes as the starting point the well-being of individuals and asks about the extent to which individuals are able to be and do what they have reason to value being and doing”. Quotes from the student data demonstrate the extent to which research participants felt able to develop their capabilities through participation in one online unit.

Sen further links substantive opportunities and freedom together as related to ‘…the existence of options and freedom of choice…’ (Sen, 2009, p. 230). He also stresses the importance of the process through which outcomes are achieved, rather than the outcomes alone (p. 230). Many of the research participants expressed a sense of excitement through having the ability to study at university made possible by online delivery, and were able to develop a love of learning. Two students shared that they wanted to push their study all the way to PhD level. There is a sense that this participation alone served to overcome barriers and injustices in their past. This is a long way from the intimidation in the face of new learning technologies, and the self-doubt about their academic abilities that the majority of the students related feeling when they first started the unit.

Citing Sen, Marginson (2011b) and Wilson-Strydom (2015) note the connection between access to university study and the development of individual agency and self-determination. Marginson (2011b, p. 30) highlights ‘…the potential of higher education in expanding freedoms…’ through the augmentation of agency freedom, and especially
freedom as power, through learning, knowledge and credentialing’. A number of research participants expressed a strong motivation to improve their lives by gaining a professional qualification through online study. One common focus was to improve the lives of their families and to provide an example to their children of the value of working towards and achieving a lofty goal. There was a sense that students wanted better than their current circumstances for themselves and their families. In this way, the agency-freedom students can gain through online participation in higher education is perceived to have the power to lift them and their families out of circumstances in which they feel constrained and unfulfilled.

There was, therefore, a significant amount of hope invested in their studies. For the research participants who successfully completed the unit and passed, the gaining of personal confidence and self-esteem, as discussed above, could also be applied to the tangible real-world outcome of moving towards a better life. This ties in strongly with Sen’s idea of social realisations, which emphasises ‘…the lives that people can actually live [and the] capabilities that people actually have…’ (2009, p. 19), as being crucial aspects of social justice.

The potential of successful participation in online higher education to transform students’ self-perceptions from doubt to confidence and the hope students invest in their university study is demonstrated in the case study. This makes the effects of non-completing on the student experience a concern. It was important to seek out the perspectives of online students who do not complete the unit so as to allow their voices to be heard alongside successful students, but these proved difficult to obtain. Only one non-completing student participated in the interview stage. One further non-completing student sent her thoughts via email with permission to use them in the research, but declined further participation.

It is concerning that both of these students seemed to be personally affected by what they termed their ‘failure’, which produced feelings of defeat. However, the difficulty of finding non-completing research participants means that the range of circumstances affecting this group of students and their reasons for not completing are still not well understood. Looking at the online learning site of one study period for ATU100, the attrition rate was a high 61%. However, it can also be noted that a significant proportion of these students appear to have had little or no intention of studying when they enrolled. The reasons for this, unfortunately, were not made clear
from the case study.

8.1.1 Implications

- There are important financial benefits for universities in enrolling non-traditional students, both from the increase in the revenue gained from students’ tuition fees (Ryan et al., 2017) and the government funding they attract (Downing, 2017). There are also reputational benefits as universities demonstrate their credibility and relevance through the contribution of higher education to the development of an equitable and inclusive society and social justice. Conversely, non-traditional students are able to gain positively from their access to university study. Universities should nurture this mutually beneficial relationship and recognise the power of higher education to affect the lives of non-traditional students in life-changing ways. Universities should also understand and appreciate the role of online delivery in facilitating this access, and the important place of tutors in the student experience in online learning spaces.

- The missing voices of non-completing students should continue to be sought out in future research. Existing studies provide some insight into the reasons for the high attrition rate of non-traditional and online students. Yoo and Huang (2013), for example, suggest that employment and career development, as well as “willingness to learn new technologies” (p. 159) affected attrition for online students. Moore and Greenland’s (2017) study of non-completing OUA students shows that employment pressures is a major cause of attrition. However, this does not account for those students who are not in employment while studying. Reasons for attrition need to be better understood since non-completion may have a negative effect on students’ personal wellbeing. While some universities have strategies in place to reach out to students who stop participating, it is concerning that those who disappear from the online space are very often difficult to reach. Additionally, if students are enrolling in online courses without the intention of participating, the reasons for this need to be brought to light. Enrolment policies may need to be re-designed to screen out those who never log on to unit learning sites.
8.2 Online Learning

Increasingly, online learning in higher education is moving from the margins to the mainstream. Over the period of this research, the numbers of Australian university students who participate in online study have continued to rise. At present, approximately one quarter of all university students in Australia study at least part of their degree online (Department of Education and Training, 2018a). This serves to normalise online learning within the university experience. Online learning is an aspect of higher education which plays an important role in expanding student enrolments and providing flexibility for a wide range of students in terms of when and where they can study.

Furthermore, online learning technologies have made possible the trend towards open university learning throughout the world (Open Education Consortium, n.d.). Globally, open universities aim to provide access to high quality university for ‘everyone, everywhere’ (Open Education Consortium, n.d.). Open Universities Australia (OUA) provides students access to courses delivered by its partner universities, inclusive of those who have not met course pre-requisites. OUA also allows further flexibility by offering four study periods a year compared to the traditional two semesters.

All of the ATU100 students who participated in this research had barriers which prevented them from being able to attend a university campus. They all emphasised that without access to online learning, they would not be able to attempt university study. Some also stated that the flexibility of the four study periods a year model assisted them to manage their time around other constraints in their lives, particularly those associated with health issues. Therefore, online learning can be seen as an important enabler of policies to both expand and broaden student participation in higher education. These findings echo larger scale studies which have noted higher participation of non-traditional/disadvantaged students in online learning sites (Knightley, 2007; Shah, Goode, West, & Clark, 2015; Stone, 2017). This is particularly true of the greater access and flexibility offered through OUA which serves a major role in facilitating access to university study to those who would otherwise be excluded.

While the numbers of students involved in online learning is one indicator of its importance to universities, foregrounding the voices of online student is a powerful way
to demonstrate its effectiveness. The voices of ATU100 students gained through interviews, questionnaires, reflective assessments and larger evaluation surveys show that online learning can be a highly effective mode of delivery for university education.

The involvement of academic staff in online learning is also growing rapidly. In ATU100, the majority of the teaching was carried out by casual academics. The literature on online learning emphasises the importance of teaching presence to online learning experiences. Teaching presence positively affects student satisfaction (Garrison & Arbaugh, 2007), their sense of connectedness (Shea et al., 2006), and the development of higher order learning skills such as critical thinking (Costley, 2016). Overall, teaching presence plays a central role ‘…in establishing and sustaining an online learning environment and realizing intended learning outcomes’ (Garrison et al., 2010, p. 35). Although the term *teacher presence* refers to both educational design and direct facilitation by tutors (Garrison et al., 2010), it was the importance of tutors direct input that ATU100 students most referred to as the major strength of ATU100 in formal unit evaluations.

Students specifically mentioned the visibility of tutors on the online discussion boards, their communication with students both within the learning site and through email, their informal and formal feedback, their encouragement, and their guidance. In the eight unit evaluations that were analysed for this study, comments about tutors far outweighed comments about all other aspects of teaching and learning. The importance of the tutor in online learning also emerged in the empirical findings from the 12 student research participants. A number of participants acknowledged the support of their tutor as playing an important part in their persistence in the unit, and felt they may not otherwise have completed the unit successfully. Similar findings regarding the important role of the tutor for online students have emerged from other recent studies regarding online learning. For example, Devlin and McKay (2016) showed that interaction with tutors in promoted student engagement and “…played a significant role in [their] success…” (p. 99).

The findings from this research suggest that supportive learning communities can be built within online spaces. Although there are suggestions in the literature that students studying online can feel isolated, and this was borne out by some of the research participants’ comments, there was a stronger sense through students’ interviews that they felt part of a community within the unit. This involved both tutors
and their peers and was built through formal and informal communication in the text-based discussion boards and real time video collaboration sessions. It appears that the learning experience provided in the online space exceeded the expectations of many of the students who completed successfully. This aligns with other literature on online learning which highlights the constructivist, collaborative nature of online learning sites (Costley, 2016; Lee & Tsai, 2011).

Difficulties and frustrations with the technology of online unit were expressed by a number of the research participants, and for some this was a barrier at first. Students mentioned feeling ‘technologically inept’, overwhelmed and uncertain, but the successful students were able to overcome this and learnt to use the tools in the online site to their advantage. For one of the non-completing students, however, it was the technological difficulties she encountered that caused her to discontinue her studies. The student expressed a sense of confusion about how to make the technology work which was primarily caused by only having an iPad on which to study. In fact, the full functionality of the unit learning site is not available on an iPad. Nevertheless, the student tried hard to persist. As a multiple sclerosis sufferer, the student had high hopes that online learning could be a vehicle towards her being able to contribute to society.

With the high attrition rate for online learning, many students who stop participating in the learning site become uncontactable. As mentioned above, it is very difficult to ascertain their reasons for discontinuing but it is possible that there are other students who leave because they cannot make the technology work for them. This idea is supported by Yoo & Huang's (2013) findings regarding the effect of students’ acceptance of new technology, and their feelings towards using technology in general, on their levels of motivation.
8.2.1 Implications

- It is clear that for successful students, online learning sites can provide spaces for satisfying interaction and personal achievement which would not otherwise be available to them. Attention should be paid to the voices of these students and to their experiences to inform online learning design and practice. In particular, universities should invest in their online teaching staff, who are a resource shown to be highly valued by students. Given the importance of tutors to nurturing the success of online students, the time and resources needed to equip tutors to do this work effectively need to be acknowledged. Professional development, technical support and other support mechanism should be available to casual online tutors and allowed for in their paid workloads.

- In the contemporary university, online students form a substantial cohort and universities benefit from the expansion of student numbers that online delivery provides. Online learning should have a more visible and recognised position in the university landscape commensurate to its importance. For example, promotional and/or informational images and videos which feature students could depict those in online learning sites as well as those on campus. Efforts could also be made to enable interaction between on-campus students and tutors with their online counterparts. These strategies would serve to reflect the increasing normalcy of this mode of delivery.

- It should be recognised that some students in open access learning have little knowledge of technology and may have inadequate devices with which to study. Clear and specific information about the equipment needed to participate in online learning should be highlighted to prospective students and technological advisors could be present and available in online learning sites for new students, at least in the first few weeks of a study period.

8.3 Tutors

Around the world, higher education is a field that is heavily dependent on casualised academic staff. Casualisation is used by universities as a way to cut human resource costs and minimise the risks associated with fluctuating student demand in marketised higher education systems (Rothengatter & Hil, 2013). In Australia, casual academic teachers are generally paid at an hourly rate for their time in front of a class,
whether on campus or online, and for their marking. They may or may not be given some hours of paid induction and meeting time in any given semester. In terms of employment conditions, generally casual academics receive a lower rate of superannuation than academics in longer term roles, are not given research or study time as part of their workload, and they are not funded to attend any kind of professional development workshops or academic conferences as part of their roles (Andrews et al., 2016). They generally do not have their own office but share a limited number of desks with other casual staff. Further, as the availability of ongoing work for casual academics is uncertain, they lack stability and financial security (Bexley et al., 2011). These conditions discussed in the literature are indicative of a marginalised segment of the university workforce. This was also evidenced through the voices of the tutors who participated in this research.

This case study involved seven tutors who had taught the OUA version of ATU100 in recent study periods. Two tutors taught only online, while the others taught both online and on campus classes. As such, much of what they relate about their professional experiences may apply more widely across the academy. All of the seven participants described feeling excluded and marginalised in the academy. One tutor stated that she chose to remain on the periphery for philosophical and ethical reasons. For the other tutors there was a sense of powerlessness in the face of their exclusion, particularly for those who needed a consistent income to support themselves and their families.

The participants considered academic teaching to be work that was demanding and complex but ultimately worthwhile and rewarding. In view of this, there was a sense that their exclusion from regular employment conditions was unjust. Most tutors felt they had no control over whether they would be offered more work and that their previous professional experience and the quality of their current teaching performance had little bearing over allocation of work for the next study period. They felt that their continuing employment was largely dependent on the goodwill of the particular coordinators running available units. However, as unit coordinators changed and moved on to other roles, this system of patronage was insecure.

It was apparent that tutors perceived that what they had to offer and what they had achieved in their teaching was invisible to the wider university. It was also clear that these tutors were personally affected by the precariousness of their casual status and
the difficulties placed before them in their desire to build a continuing career in a field of work that they loved. This aligns with the literature which reinforces the lack of career progression for casual academic teachers. As Nadolny & Ryan (2015, p. 150) state, ‘…the university has no formal career path for its casual workforce nor even career advice… Tenure and hence security may never be achieved’.

Despite this uncertainty and their poor working conditions, the tutors who participated in this research reported finding the teaching aspects of their work, such as interacting with students and supporting them in their studies, to be highly rewarding. This was particularly so with the diverse student cohorts who study online through OUA. Tutors appreciated the rich opportunities to discuss topics collaboratively with students within online learning environments. They conveyed a sense of dedication to their teaching work and care for their online students which drove them to put in more hours than they were paid for, effectively donating their time to the university.

There is certainly no shortage of studies in the literature which detail similar conditions and experiences to those outlined by the tutors here (cf. Stromquist, 2017b; Kezar & Maxey, 2014b; Rothengatter & Hil, 2013; Brown et al., 2010). This case study went further to place these findings alongside the voices of non-traditional, online students. Sections of this thesis have highlighted the high quality of teaching that the casual tutors provided to these students and the significance of this contribution to the university. Indeed, Andrews et al. (2016, p. 1) suggest that it is casual academics that underpin ‘[t]he apparent success and robustness of the Australian university system in an environment of short term funding and volatility in student numbers…’ This makes the conditions of their employment even more troubling.

Tutors related that the imbalance of power in their relationships with continuing staff was stressful. A list given in the literature outlining “benefits” of casualisation in higher education inadvertently demonstrates this imbalance. It includes, ‘…facilitating a more congenial work/life balance for full-time staff where sessional staff teach the evening, early morning, or…weekend classes’ and ‘…freeing up time for full-time, tenured staff to pursue research or other necessary tasks’ (Cowley, as cited in Davis, Perrott, & Perry, 2014, p. 48). These benefits seem to only apply to the full-time staff. Rothengatter & Hil (2013) are highly critical of the lack of support continuing staff at universities give to the “plight” of casual academics (p. 52). While it has been established that the economic and political climate of recent decades has propelled the
casualisation of the academy, Gehrke and Kezar (2015) found that at an institutional level the values of senior administrators had a greater role than budgetary constraints in determining whether supportive measures for casual staff were adopted.

Evidence from student evaluation surveys and student interviews discussed above indicate that ATU100 tutors were able to carry out their online teaching effectively. Even so, Kezar and Maxey, (2014a) call into question the sustainability of teaching quality founded on casualisation. Kezar (2013) proposes that innovation in teaching, particularly in regards to the use of new technologies, is limited by the lack of staff continuity caused by casualisation. This results in an inability to implement new initiatives with consistency. Kezar and Maxey use these considerations of teaching quality (2014a), as well as the questionable ethical dimensions of university employment practices (2014b), to highlight a risk to university reputations which are built on providing a quality experience to students and contributing to social justice within the wider society. Brown et al. (2010) agree that the treatment of casual academics threatens the status of higher education as a public good. While the status of university education is important, the risk to the individual wellbeing of casual academic tutors demonstrated in this research is also a legitimate concern. The tutor participants in the case study revealed that their physical and personal wellbeing was negatively affected by their casual status.

8.3.1 Implications

- The findings of this case study put together with the existing research show that casual academics are largely excluded from the academy. More institutional acknowledgement should be given to the value of casual academic teachers’ work to universities. Inclusion for casual academics in the collegial community should become a consistent priority across higher education. Such a priority could include participation in wider aspects of academic life, such as providing feedback and having an input into the units in which the tutors teach at the design and development stage. Some units, particularly those delivered online, are taught almost exclusively by casual staff which gives them insights that are valuable to the university. Paid attendance at meetings is also important, especially when decisions affecting casual staff are discussed. Professional development alongside continuing staff should be provided to ensure casual online tutors keep abreast with technological and pedagogical developments
within online learning. Some universities have implemented some similar strategies (Percy et al., 2008). However, problems remain if tutors are not paid for their time.

- A discussion should occur within higher education about how the role of casual academic teachers can be redesigned. This discussion should involve substantial consultation with casual academics and be premised on the recognition that casual academics have an important place in the fabric of the university. The current dichotomy between casual academic teachers and ‘real’ academics needs to be problematised at all levels of the academy. As emphasised by Kezar (2013), continuing the role of casual academic teachers in its current form is counterproductive to the functioning of the university, counter to innovation, including technological, and likely to be unsustainable.

### 8.4 Suggestions for Further Research

This case study has sought out and foregrounded the voices of some to the least powerful actors in the academy, casual tutors and non-traditional, online students. This was important to enable the experiences and perspectives of these participants in higher education to be better understood. However, the small sample sizes means that this research is not exhaustive. Moreover, many of the changes indicated in the research can only be addressed by those involved in university management and decision making. These particularly pertain to greater inclusion and visibility of students studying through online modes of learning and casual online teachers, and improving the professional conditions of casual academics more generally. Therefore, the following recommendations for further research are suggested.

- Research into a wider range of online students is needed. There are missing voices within online learning that need to be sought out and better understood. It is important to start building understanding of those students who disappear from online units, or who never appeared in the first place. This is difficult since research depends on participants’ voluntary responses to calls for involvement. Those who appear to have cut contact with their universities are amongst the least likely to respond to these calls. Further research is needed to identify creative ways to reach out to these students. There is also a need for further research involving larger numbers of students who have been successful in online learning to ascertain the extent to which they share the positive outcomes.
of the successful student participants in this case study.

- There is a need for more research involving those in management positions at universities to understand their attitudes in relation to casualisation. It is these university decision makers who have the power to implement changes that could positively affect casual academics. Gehrke and Kezar (2015) explain that it is institutional characteristics and the values held by university administrators that shape decisions to support casual academic staff. Research is needed to identify ways to more effectively bring the experiences of casual academics to the attention of administrators and to demonstrate their value to the university, as well as motivate those in management positions to improve employment practices and support casual staff.

- Research should be conducted which seeks out existing good practice internationally regarding casual academic staff. Some recent conference presentations have discussed ways to utilise the potential of casual academics to contribute to the academy beyond class delivery alone. For example, at the Enhancing Student Learning through Innovative Scholarship Conference (ESLTIS) in the UK, Southall presented on the unique placement of casual tutors to contribute to the scholarship of teaching and learning (Southall, 2017). In the Australian context, an initiative for employing casual academics to facilitate major curriculum change in addition to their direct teaching work, was presented at the Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia Annual Conference (McKenzie, Parker, Edwards, Heggart, & Harahap, 2017). These initiatives highlight the benefits of the inclusion of causal academics into aspects of academic work not normally considered part of their role. It can be assumed that similar initiatives may have been implemented at different universities across the world. Further research to identify initiatives and make them more widely known will be valuable in illustrating what a redesigned role for casual tutors within the academy might potentially look like.
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Appendix A  Research Outputs: Conferences


Dodo-Balu A. (2016, October 20-24). “*I’m a different person now*: Online learning as a de-facto higher education equity pathway to transforming lives.” Refereed paper presented at the International Academic Forum Asian Conference on Society, Education and Technology, Kobe Japan

Dodo-Balu A. (2015, Nov 30- Dec 3). *The importance of grit and institutional and peer support for transformational online learning.* Poster presented at the Australian Association for Research in Education Conference, Fremantle Australia

Dodo-Balu A. (2015, July 6-9). *The good news is the bad news (in higher education teaching and learning).* Talk presented at the 38th Annual Conference of the Higher Education Research and Development Association of Australasia (HERDSA), Melbourne Australia


Appendix B  Analysis and Findings form Data Gathered by Researcher

1) Excerpts from transcripts and coding (example from student data)

Student 3 – ‘Amanda’ (2 surveys, 1 interview, 1 reflective journal)

1a. Interview transcript (pp.1-2 of 8) with codes identified and highlighted

Notes of main points S3 interview Part A

**Question: How about the time away from study that you had before starting this unit?**

I worked out that it was roughly 15 years or so. It was ‘99 to 2000 that I was past studying at ___ university. I didn’t actually complete it, but that was the last uni study I did.

- **Question: Was (the focus unit) one of the first units you did?**

Yes, the very first unit. It was recommended through pathways as the entry into OUA studies for the Communications degree I’m taking. So that’s the reason for taking it.

...  

- **Question: (To what extent do you agree or disagree with the statement) - the unit content was similar to what I expected.**

Well, I had to disagree with that one because when I was... thinking about what the source would be like I was ... thinking it was going to be more essay based... There’d be essay skills and more research skills... I mean, quite obviously it was research skills based but it quite a bit different to what I expected it was going to be... **It was more based around the open mind, clearing your thought processes rather than... strict essay formalities...**

...  

- **Question: So were you happy that it was different?**

Yes, very happy. I really enjoyed the course... I was very happy with how the course worked out. It a quite a bit less stressful than I thought it would be.

...  

- **Question: What did you think about the reflective writing component of the unit?**

That was the part I found the easiest, if anything... **It was a good thing to be able to go through and formulate my thoughts... Really analyse what I was thinking about certain topics... Being able to do it in a... stream of consciousness type way was very helpful...** (I) didn’t have any impediments (like) I have to be thinking this way or what are they expecting me to bring up...

- **Question: Do you think that those kind of skills that you learnt and appreciated were actually relevant to you in your future units?**

I think they will be yes... it obviously a different environment than when you are... doing face-to-face study... rather than as flexible as OUA is... **It was good to get an insight into how it can apply to the rest of what you want to do in terms of work... with the nature of the study, doing it online... So, yeah, I think it is relevant.**
• Question: So did you find that the skills that you learnt in using online technology and working within an online environment would maybe be helpful to you in the future?

I think so, I mean I'd like to head into an area of working from home, doing something along the lines of research/academic... self-oriented sort of work or project work and I think that... those sort of skills... I particularly liked the research side of things, when we were doing the first research project... through the library catalogues and that sort of thing. It was very handy to get to know that and get to understand how all that works, so it was good.

• Question: You mentioned the face-to-face environment. So are you intending, or have you started face-to-face classes now at university?

No I haven’t. I’m intending to do all of my study online. When I did it 15 years ago, I didn’t get the same response from things as I do now. I think that was a bit of an impediment for me personally. I guess I just didn’t work as well in that context as I do now. Competing with all this different sort of stress factors... So I find this a lot easier.

• Question: So you are saying that you find the online environment a better place for you to study than face-to-face?

Yes, that’s right... I’m not necessarily that good at communicating... on a one-to-one level... it takes less pressure to be able to communicate in other ways like Blackboard and... email and that sort of thing. It’s preferable for me...

• Question: (To what extend do you agree or disagree with the statement) - It was difficult to know what was expected of me in the unit?

I disagree with that one as well. I found that it was fairly clear cut for me. The biggest problem I had was probably the essay work, but everything was just straight forward, I found it clear to understand.

• Question: Was that part of the way it was set up online, or was it because you were active in asking questions to get clarity?

Probably a little bit of asking questions, but generally it was just... I guess I just had the time to... think through what was expected and it was just laid out in a very clear sense to me. It made logical sense to me what was required.

• Question: You mentioned that you had time, so were you also working?

No, not at the moment. I’m a single parent. I’ve got one daughter. So, it’s just myself and my daughter. My main obligations at the moment are with my daughter and obviously studying now...

• Question: And how many units were you doing at the same time?

I was just doing the one for a start, slowly phasing myself into it... I’ll take on a bit more once I’m a little bit more comfortable with the processes and I’ve got my time structure working better.

• Question: How old is your daughter at the moment?

She just turned 12... So, she’s starting to enter teenage years, a little bit older and more able to, you know, independence so I’ve got a little bit more time. It’s not as time consuming to take care of her in a sense so... I just figured this was a good time to get started now...

...
I had a strongly agree for (the statement that online study was an effective mode of study). I felt that I didn’t necessarily miss out on group interaction. I felt that I was OK with the approach that was given... I was happy with how that worked...

Excerpts of codes from the interview

**Unit content has value to life outside of academia**

**Doing the unit transforms students’ thinking**

**Students are highly enthusiastic about the unit after completion**

**Peer discussion forums and interactivity can create a sense of being in a learning community**

**If online study was not available, students would not have access to the means to gain a degree**

**Students are studying a degree to increase their professional opportunities and understandings**

1b. Follow up survey (pp. 1-2 of 4) with codes identified and highlighted

**Scaled questions: Please indicate your agreement to the following statements**

These are the theoretical statements which have so far emerged from interviews with students. Looking back on HUM/APC and tertiary level online study as a whole, to what extent do these statements accurately reflect your experience?

1. Students are highly enthusiastic about the unit after completion (strongly disagree; disagree; neutral; agree; strongly agree)

2. Doing the unit transforms students’ thinking (strongly disagree; disagree; neutral; agree; strongly agree)

3. Unit content has value to life outside of academia (strongly disagree; disagree; neutral; agree; strongly agree)

4. The unit changes students’ self-perception in a positive way (strongly disagree; disagree; neutral; agree; strongly agree)

5. The unit is challenging but the challenges had beneficial outcomes (strongly disagree; disagree; neutral; agree; strongly agree)

6. Online study is a gateway to university opportunities (strongly disagree; disagree; neutral; agree; strongly agree)

7. Some technological and pedagogical problems are associated with online learning (strongly disagree; disagree; neutral; agree; strongly agree)

8. Students feel part of a learning community (strongly disagree; disagree; neutral; agree; strongly agree)

9. Tutors have an important supporting role
Please read through the questions below which will be discussed during the interview. You may like to jot down some notes in the space provided.

This part of the interview will primarily focus on your experience of continuing study after completing HUM/APC

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Q.</th>
<th>What do you hope to achieve for your future by undertaking university study? Have your goals changed since commencing your study?</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A.</td>
<td>I’m less affected by the concept that I have to be tied to a career path dictated by the degree I’m taking because of financial issues. I think of study now as a way to open up my mind and life to new experiences and thoughts and I believe now that this element of studying will be more important to my life in the long run.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Q.</th>
<th>How well do you feel HUM/APC prepared you for your continuing university study? Please explain.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A.</td>
<td>It’s broken down the majority of my fear that ‘I can’t because I’m not smart enough’; I’ve just enrolled in two more units for the degree after roughly an 18 month gap owing to health issues and the decision to return was immensely easier owing to my experience in APC.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Q.</th>
<th>How would you compare your continuing university experience to your experience in HUM/APC?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A.</td>
<td>As I’m resuming at the end of February, not able to answer this question at this time.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Q.</th>
<th>Have you completed the subsequent units towards your degree? If yes, what has helped you to persist? / If no, what influenced your decision to withdraw or postpone?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A.</td>
<td>My daughter’s injury that took place while I was completing APC led to two surgeries and many months of rehab as well as psychological counselling for her. She had recovered substantially by the time of entering high school at which point my health deteriorated and I went through surgery and months of recovery for my own health issues. This is the first opportunity that’s arisen to re-commence study with life circumstances being stable again.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Excerpt of codes from follow-up survey

- Unit content has value to life outside of academia
- The unit changes students’ self-perception in a positive way
- Life outside of university impacts on ability to study

1c. Reflective Journal (p. 9 of 9) with codes identified and highlighted

**Entry 6: Final Reflection on APC100**

As I noted in a previous reflection, this unit defied my preconceptions. I feel I’ve gained considerably more in undertaking it than just an increase in knowledge of technical details of university study. **The subject matter was fascinating as far as helping me to investigate and define the beliefs I hold.** As much as I don’t believe anyone should ever reach a point where they stop challenging themselves, the thinking processes that were established during this course have helped me to realise just how stagnant some of my viewpoints were on a range of issues, most particularly in regards to gender and racism. I’ve also found it enlightening to have a new understanding of the implications behind the communication of news and media, and that has already filtered through to how I now interpret news articles and social media.

That is not to say that the technical elements haven’t been extremely useful to learn as well. I find myself reading the above paragraph for instance, and thinking there are numerous ways I could clarify meaning via language, and I have attempted to do so; I could happily edit forever though and still not be satisfied. Which brings me to another way that this course has improved my awareness of myself and how I approach study.

I was very doubtful of my ability to successfully undertake this course when I enrolled, the sentiment was comparable to how I might feel if I decided to try out sky-diving for the first time. And to some extent, I’m dissatisfied with the results I’ve achieved. While I hope that I will be able to achieve a pass, personal circumstances have resulted in concentration lapses such that I know my essay result in particular could have been significantly better. However in contrast to that, even if I do have to repeat the unit, I won’t be ‘white-knuckling’ the parachute straps next time! I think I’ve always tended to personalise my mistakes to an unhealthy degree; **my life has followed a pattern of allowing difficulties or mistakes to be translated into failure and lack of self-worth.** This course has proven to be vital though in changing that. While there were occasions when I didn’t believe completing the unit would be possible, enough self-
transformation has taken place that I have an improved objectivity regarding my skills and abilities, despite any setbacks I might face in the future. It’s a lot easier now to see that my weaknesses don’t automatically cancel out any strengths that I have.

Excerpt of codes from reflective journal

The unit changes students’ self-perception in a positive way

1d. Excerpt from student table of quotes and codes (pp. 5-7 of 27)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The unit changes students’ self-perception in a positive way</th>
<th>S1: [interview] “The critical analysis I found that I’m still using now. Even though I have never thought myself a critical person, I found that I am. I naturally question everything and I naturally read between the lines... That was something that I discovered about myself that I didn’t know.”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>S2: [Question – Has your self-perception changed] “Yes, I feel it’s impacted me in so many ways.”</td>
<td>S2: “I’m OK. I’m part of this world. I’m not a housewife that is dated and not in touch with technology, not in touch with contemporary art...”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S2: [interview] “It’s done a lot for my self-confidence. It’s been huge... I’m a different person now to what I wrote in one of those critical reflections...”</td>
<td>S3: [Follow-up questionnaire] “… my life has followed a pattern of allowing difficulties or mistakes to be translated into failure and lack of self-worth. This course has proven to be vital though in changing that... enough self-transformation has taken place that I have an improved objectivity regarding my skills and abilities, despite any setbacks I might face in the future. It’s a lot easier now to see that my weaknesses don’t automatically cancel out any strengths that I have.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S3: [interview] “(Completing the unit) was fantastic! It was a really good ego-boost, confidence-boost to get that mark... I think I had two attempts at (other university) at different points over a couple of years and I... ended up withdrawing from all my units both times... so that was a major set-back for me. So to actually get a final mark, it wouldn’t have mattered if I had only barely scraped through... Just the fact that I actually got the result, I completed it was a really big deal to me...”</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>S3: [interview] “When I completed the (unit) and got my final mark, it was like... confirmation of realising that I am capable of accomplishing this and completing this...”</td>
<td>S3: [Reflective Journal] “… my life has followed a pattern of allowing difficulties or mistakes to be translated into failure and lack of self-worth. This course has proven to be vital though in changing that... enough self-transformation has taken place that I have an improved objectivity regarding my skills and abilities, despite any setbacks I might face in the future. It’s a lot easier now to see that my weaknesses don’t automatically cancel out any strengths that I have.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S4: [Interview] “I transformed from a student unable to participate, to one who really looked forward to reading and participating in the discussion threads”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
S6: [interview] “I became more confident, much more confident... So I really did change from someone who though she didn’t deserve to be there, to being someone who was really looking forward to her next subject, and who knew this was going to be a really long journey, and who was really excited and ready to, you know, cliché, but run headlong into it. Yeah, it was very very positive for me.”

S6: [interview] “Actually when I started the course, I decided I didn’t want to be... I didn’t want to be an uneducated mother, because I have my eldest son [who is] now thirteen, and he moved to Queensland to live with his father, and I can’t help but think that maybe the way I am had something to do with that. You know, he’d look at mum and... she has a mental illness, she’s single, she lives on welfare, she’s uneducated... I didn’t want him to see me that way. That’s actually why I enrolled. It wasn’t until I got to maybe Week 8 or 9... I thought I actually imagine myself going out and working in the workplace, and I realised I had been made to feel as though because I had a mental illness I almost didn’t deserve to be employed... So, yes I did. I actually though wow, I can actually go out and I can get a job and I can give my children more options, and myself more options. So that was, yeah, that was a big change.”

S8: [Follow-up questionnaire] “To start with no university experience and now to be finishing the first module in what seems like such a short time is unbelievable”

S8: [Follow-up questionnaire] “It... gave me the confidence that I could do Uni.”

S9: [Reflective Journal] “I went into this course expecting to fail. I didn’t believe that I could do it.”

S9: [Reflective Journal] “I must be capable of a lot more than I think I am.”

S9: [Reflective Journal] “...this unit has given me one very important thing - it has shown me that I am actually capable of doing something. By just completing this one unit, doesn't it show that I do have the ability to complete this degree? If I can complete this unit, why can’t I complete every other unit in this degree?”

2) Themes and categories: Students

Themes developed from quotes taken from student interviews, pre-interview qualitative questionnaire response, follow-up questionnaire responses, reflective journals, and 1 email response following thematic analysis.

Cluster 1
Theme: Positive and transformative effect on students’ lives of accessing and experiencing online higher education

Categories:

- Unit content has value to life outside of academia
- Doing the unit transforms students’ thinking and empowers students
• The unit changes students’ self-perception in a positive way
• Students are studying a degree to increase their professional opportunities/understandings
• Some students study for personal interest
• Students develop a love of learning

Cluster 2
Theme: Importance and effectiveness of online and flexible modes of delivery in providing access to university study
Categories:
• If online study was not available, students would not have access to the means to gain a degree
• Structural flexibility allows students to study around their life circumstances
• Opportunity to study online corrects past and long-term barriers to study
• Life outside of university impacts on ability to study
• Peer discussion forums and interactivity can create a sense of being in a learning community
• Students can disclose as much or as little of their personal identities as is comfortable

Cluster 3
Theme: Effectiveness of focus unit in meeting students’ needs in terms of becoming equipped for university study and gaining confidence in academic ability
Categories:
• Students are not equipped for university study and have self-doubt when they enrol in the unit
• Technology involved can be a challenge and overwhelming at first
• The unit is challenging and complex but the challenges had beneficial outcomes
• Students are highly enthusiastic about the unit after completion
• Tools in learning site helpful to student success in the unit

Cluster 4:
Theme: Support from tutors, peers and family important to successful study but student’s personal determination is a key aspect
Categories:
• Online education can be isolating compared to face-to-face
Support from others involved in the unit helps students to persevere but is not essential to passing academically

Direct tutor support makes a difference to the student experience

Family and friends may not be supportive or helpful regarding online study/
Some students have strong family support

Personal determination is a key element for successful completion

Thematic statements:
1. Access to and the experience of online higher education can have a positive and transformative effect on students’ lives.
2. Online and flexible modes of study are important enablers of access to university study and provide an effective learning experience
3. Focus unit meets students’ needs in terms of becoming equipped for university study and gaining confidence in their academic ability.
4. Support from tutors, peers and family may be important to successful study but student's personal determination is a key aspect.

3) Excerpts from transcripts and coding (example from student data)

Tutor 3 – ‘Lily’ (1 interview, I survey)

3a. Interview transcript (pp.1-2 of 5) with codes identified and highlighted

Notes of main points T3 Interview Recording 1

• Question: Did you receive any training to teach online?

When I first started I really just went in cold… I floundered a little bit and I looked at what other people were writing…and (thought) about how I could tackle things…I wasn’t adventurous…Looking at now, after several years’ experience, I’m more prepared to try new things whereas when I first started I would have been quite conservative.

• Question: What were the things that you found most different to a face-to-face teaching situation?

You haven’t got the students in the here and now… You’re posting and thinking that they will come in in the future to respond.

You have to be very careful about what you write, so that it’s not misinterpreted.

You have to be very clear because you don’t have the body language to see how the other person is perceiving it.
I tend to use...smileys, or winks in my posts... just to say, “I wasn’t overly serious there”. It’s really hard to bring in humour... but it is important.

The content too, when I first started... It was difficult to know... should I spend on (getting familiar with) the content or should I spend more time interacting with students...

- **Question:** Did you find that you would often spend longer than (the allocated time working time) or do you really time yourself?

  I’ve had a couple of times where I’ve tried to time myself, but I do tend to get easily distracted. So it’s really difficult to say that, OK I’ve been sitting here in the computer room for four hours but was I working for four hours? Most probably no... out of that four hours maybe only two of them were productively spent.

  I did try to jot down the hours and I found that some weeks I would spend more time, considerably more time, but then I’d have be a few days when things were busy in my personal life or the discussion board wasn’t busy... I would find that the times averaged out.

  ...

- **Question:** So do you like that flexibility?

  Yes, I like that flexibility. I don’t particularly like Collaborate... which is when we have to meet at a given time in an online (space) ... that takes away from the flexibility... I don’t like to say well I’ve got to be online for that one hour, and it conflicts with something else in my life.

  ...

- **Question:** How do you find the student response to those Collaborate sessions, where they are given an opportunity to actually interact in real-time with the tutors?

  (In a recent session) only one or two (students) actually came from my group... so I don’t actually feel like it’s getting to my group of students.

  ...

- **Question:** Talking about the unit we are focussing on here...do you see any difference in that unit as a first year, often the first unit that students do and other units that you’ve taught online as far as what students need...?

  I think the (focus) unit is a very heavy unit so if the students are just coming into an online course, we lose quite a lot because they’re daunted by the amount of work they have to do and the different types.

  But I found a lot of them did drop by the wayside, especially when they were asked to use technology, for example, that they hadn’t used. A lot of the students coming in didn’t have the technology skills to cope with what we were asking them to do.

  
  - **Question:** So what kind of technology are you talking about?

    For instance, recording your voice as a presentation and uploading it...

    We have to look at the needs of the students and their thoughts and feelings, but we also need to look at what we need of them as a university student...
Notes of main points T3 Interview Recording 2

- **Question:** It was interesting that you said the students with resilience get through. What do you mean by that? What kind of characteristics do those students show that you've noticed? ...

(Some) start something and maybe don’t finish... and they’re prepared to... do that... and there are other people... (who) like to finish what (they) start. “I’m prepared maybe to accept that I might not do so as well as I hoped that I would do ... but I believe in myself and I believe that I can finish even if I’m not the best.”

There are a lot of different elements that make up that resilience... So, one is believing in yourself, another one is knowing that you can finish the job and making sure that you do it no matter what obstacles... Some students come to a mole hill and see a mountain that they can’t climb over and others think “Yeah, that’s a problem but I can get over the top of it. I can survive, maybe I won’t do as well”...

Some of these students, perhaps they are resilient but they do have mountains, some of them aren’t just molehills. I had one (student) who was sleeping in her car, she’d been kicked out of her house, with two children, well you have to turn around to that student and say, “Look, it’s OK to pull out”...

**Excerpts of codes from the interview**

- Nature of this university transition unit as being complex and difficult to teach
- Non-completion rate for online students is much higher than for face-to-face students
- Technology is difficult for tutors and/or students, which can produce anxiety
- Sessional teaching suits certain situations
- Lack of readiness to deal with online teaching
- Requirements and results of online communication are different to the face-to-face classroom
- Diverse nature of OUA online students compared to face to face students

**3b. Follow up survey**

**Scaled questions:** Please indicate your agreement to the following statements

These are the thematic statements which emerged from the interviews with tutors. Looking back on being a casual academic in the OUA versions of HUM/APC and casual online tutoring as a whole, to what extent do these statements accurately reflect your experience? Please highlight the relevant response.

**Themes**

1. There is negligible involvement in the collegial community, course feedback processes, and professional development for casual academics
2. Non-traditional students are extremely diverse and teaching them is both challenging and rewarding, particularly in OUA
(strongly disagree; disagree; neutral; agree; strongly agree)

3. Online learning is different to teaching on campus, with higher workloads and expectations from students, and higher attrition rates but rich opportunities for collaboration.
(strongly disagree; disagree; neutral; agree; strongly agree)

4. There is a lack of adequate training or preparation for teaching online despite its greater challenges and complexities, but effectiveness and quality of teaching remains high.
(strongly disagree; disagree; neutral; agree; strongly agree)

5. Causal tutors’ unstable and insecure working conditions have negative effects on their financial, professional, mental and physical wellbeing as well as adversely impacting the academy
(strongly disagree; disagree; neutral; agree; strongly agree)

The codes below were developed by grouping direct quotes from the tutor interviews and informed the thematic statements. Could you please indicated if you agree with each code by highlighting: Yes, No, or Unsure?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>Unsure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>• The benefit of talking about and reflecting on teaching practice with colleagues</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Benefit of meeting with colleagues formally and/or informally for communication and sharing ideas etc</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Lack of opportunity to participate in academic community and professional development</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• The need to set up own support as it is not offered by university</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Support linked to a particular coordinator rather than general faculty/school policy</td>
<td>Yes - sometimes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Lack of consistent presence on campus for tutors</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>• Nature of university transition units as being complex/ difficult to teach</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Diverse nature of OUA online students compared to face to face students</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Non-traditional students bring rich life experience and more maturity to their learning</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>• A higher workload for online teaching / Online students expect more from tutors than face to face students</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Not always</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Online tutoring has some advantages over face to face tutoring in terms of workload</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Requirements and results of online communication are different to the face-to-face classroom</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Lack of readiness to deal with online teaching</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Casual academic status has a negative impact on sense of fulfilment professionally and personally</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Don’t feel part of the university</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Stressful and overwhelming/ Effect on physical health</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lack of stability and negative impact on financial position</td>
<td>Yes - sometimes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Need to take on a heavy workload to make a fulltime income</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lack of notice and preparation for work offered</td>
<td>Yes - sometimes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>System of patronage for gaining work limits full potential</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sessional teaching is not a career path</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sessional teaching suits certain situations</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Teaching expertise is drained (not well utilised) from the university because of conditions of sessional work</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

3c. Excerpt from tutor table of quotes and codes (pp. 3-4 of 23)
Lack of readiness to deal with online teaching

T1: “And it was the same again for the first time I taught EITH online, it was almost that same experience all over again because it was just so different.”

T1: “…because you don’t know how to not answer 50 emails… how to stop the train”.

T1: “…because I’ve never studied as an online student… I was just into this world where I wasn’t even studying… I was expected to know what I was doing because I was the tutor of an online unit”.

T2: “I think I should have felt adequately equipped but I didn’t. [tone of voice conveys a ‘litany of problems’ in this section] I struggled with the forum set up. I struggled with attempting to work out how to record a welcome message, and I never did conquer that. I could not get the tech to work.”

T2: “Working out how to set up the framework. How to actually upload content. So, it was just the practical side of, “How do I upload the welcome content?”

T2: “I am reasonably technically proficient, I’m a bit of a geek, but I still struggled.”

T2: “And I made a mess at one point, and I know I contacted the unit coordinator… to come and help me. Because I couldn’t work out what I had done wrong at one point. So I did ask for help when I realised I was making a mess of things and I could not get the forum headers and the posts to look right.”

T3: “When I first started I really just went in cold… I floundered a little bit and I looked at what other people were writing…and (thought) about how I could tackle things… I wasn’t adventurous”

T3: “…when I first started… It was difficult to know… should I spend time on (getting familiar with) the content or should I spend more time interacting with students…”

T5: “…it was very overwhelming the first time I taught OUA because there were quite a lot of assessments coming in. I had to look ahead, I had a different timetable to my other units… so I had to keep on track with that and with a different program calendar at the same time. So it was definitely pretty overwhelming the first time.”

T5: “I always found it interesting with online conversations… what level of formality and distance do you keep with the students?”

4) Themes and categories: Tutors

Themes developed from quotes from tutor interviews following thematic analysis and checking though follow up surveys.
Cluster 1:
Theme: Negligible involvement of casual academics in the collegial community, course feedback processes and professional development

Categories:

- The benefit of talking about and reflecting on teaching practice with colleagues
- Benefit of meeting with colleagues formally and/or informally for communication and sharing ideas etc
- Lack of opportunity to participate in academic community and professional development
- The need to set up own support as it is not offered by university
- Support linked to a particular coordinator rather than general faculty/school policy
- Lack of consistent presence on campus for tutors

Cluster 2:
Theme: Diversity of non-traditional students brings both challenges and rewards for teachers particularly in OUA

Categories:

- Nature of university transition units as being complex/difficult to teach
- Diverse nature of OUA online students compared to face to face students
- Non-traditional students bring rich life experience and more maturity to their learning

Cluster 3:
Theme: Online tutoring creates specific characteristics for teaching, with higher workloads and expectations from students, higher attrition rates but richer opportunities for collaboration.

Categories:

- A higher workload for online teaching / Online students expect more from tutors than face to face students
- Online tutoring has some advantages over face to face tutoring in terms of workload
• Requirements and results of online communication are different to the face-to-face classroom
• The online environment offers opportunities for students to collaborate more richly than the face-to-face environment
• Non-completion rate for online students is much higher than for face-to-face students

Cluster 4:
Theme: Lack of adequate training or preparation for teaching online despite its greater challenges and complexities, but effectiveness and quality of teaching remains high
Categories:
• Lack of readiness to deal with online teaching
• Lack of or inadequateness of training to teach online
• Technology is difficult for tutors and/or students, which can produce anxiety
• Support from tutors important for some students to keep going
• Goodwill of tutors to teach well

Cluster 5:
Themes: Negative effects of causal tutors’ unstable and insecure working conditions on their long and short term financial, professional, mental and physical wellbeing, and on the academy
Categories:
• Casual academic status has a negative impact on sense of fulfilment professionally and personally
• Don’t feel part of the university
• Stressful and overwhelming/Effect on physical health
• Lack of stability and negative impact on financial position
• Need to take on a heavy workload to make a fulltime income
• Lack of notice and preparation for work offered
• System of patronage for gaining work limits full potential
• Sessional teaching is not a career path
• Sessional teaching suits certain situations
• Teaching expertise is drained from the university because of conditions of sessional work
Thematic statements:

6. There is negligible involvement in the collegial community, course feedback processes, and professional development for casual academics

7. Non-traditional students are extremely diverse and teaching them is both challenging and rewarding, particularly in OUA

8. Online learning is different to teaching on campus, with higher workloads and expectations from students, and higher attrition rates but rich opportunities for collaboration.

9. There is a lack of adequate training or preparation for teaching online despite its greater challenges and complexities, but effectiveness and quality of teaching remains high.

10. Causal tutors’ unstable and insecure working conditions have negative effects on their long and short term financial, professional, mental and physical wellbeing as well as adversely impacting the academy
Appendix C  
Research Instruments

1) 

Student Pre-interview Survey

Demographic information:

Age: (please circle) 18-25; 26-35; 36-45; 46-55; 56-65; 66-75; 76-85; 86-95

Income (optional; please circle) 20,000-40,000; 41,000-60,000; 61,000-80,000; 81,000-100,000; above 100,000

Previous level of study: Completed high school: Yes/No
Certificate: completed/attempted
Diploma: completed/attempted
Undergraduate degree: completed/attempted

Time away from study before commencing with OUA: __________ years

Is English an additional language or dialect for you? Yes/No

Did you study [ ] in your first OUA study period? Yes/No

Scaled questions: Please indicate your agreement to the following statements

1. The aims and requirements of the unit were relevant to my future study
(strongly disagree; disagree; neutral; agree; strongly agree)

2. It was difficult to know what was expected of me in the unit
(strongly disagree; disagree; neutral; agree; strongly agree)

3. The unit helped me in my understanding of the academic conventions and discourses of my discipline
(strongly disagree; disagree; neutral; agree; strongly agree)

4. Online study was an effective mode of delivery for me
(strongly disagree; disagree; neutral; agree; strongly agree)

5. I felt that I missed out on the group interaction and support that is present in face to face delivery
(strongly disagree; disagree; neutral; agree; strongly agree)
6. I felt well-connected to my tutor and course administrators  
(strongly disagree; disagree; neutral; agree; strongly agree)

7. I felt part of a learning community  
(strongly disagree; disagree; neutral; agree; strongly agree)

8. I felt like a valued member of the university  
(strongly disagree; disagree; neutral; agree; strongly agree)

9. My tutor assisted students effectively in the online learning environment  
(strongly disagree; disagree; neutral; agree; strongly agree)

10. I felt like I was on my own to get through the course as best I could  
(strongly disagree; disagree; neutral; agree; strongly agree)

Please read through the questions below which will be discussed during the interview.  
You may like to jot down some notes in the space provided.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Q.</th>
<th>What do you hope to achieve for your future by undertaking university study?</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A.</td>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Q.</th>
<th>How well prepared did you feel to undertake university study before commencement? Why?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A.</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Q.</th>
<th>Why did you choose to study through OUA?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A.</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Q.</th>
<th>Did you complete the unit? If yes, what helped you to persist? / If no, what influenced your decision to withdraw?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A.</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Q.</th>
<th>How important to your experience of the unit was involvement in the unit Blackboard site? Why?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>A.</td>
<td>Q. How important to your experience of the unit was a feeling of belonging to the university community? Why?</td>
</tr>
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<td>----</td>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A.</td>
<td>Q. How important to your experience of the unit was support from family and friends? Why?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A.</td>
<td>Q. How important to your experience of the unit was your own personal determination? Why?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A.</td>
<td>Q. What were the greatest challenges for you in studying <strong>ATU100</strong>?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A.</td>
<td>Q. What were the most helpful aspects for you in studying <strong>ATU100</strong>?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Pilot Tutor Interview Questions

(The interviews will be semi-structured to allow for follow-up and expansion of responses. These questions are an outline of the starting points for discussion.)

- What is it like working as a casual teaching academic?
  - How does your casual status affect your relationships and contact with other staff?
  - How about your relationships and contact with your students?

- Do you feel that your working conditions impact on your capacity to teach effectively? If so, in what way?

- Do you feel adequately supported and equipped in teaching the particular students in the unit? Why/why not?

- Did you receive any training prior to teaching the unit online?

- How do you approach solving problems which may arise for your online students during the study period? Can you give some examples of different situations and what you have done?

- Do you feel you have a satisfactory professional experience in the unit? Why/why not?

- Do you think the opportunity to regularly interact with colleagues would enhance your experience of the unit? Why/why not?

- What suggestions would you offer to improve the experience of casual tutors in this unit?

- Does your status as a casual academic impact on your life outside of the workplace in any way? If so, in what way(s)?
Student Follow-up Questions

Scaled questions: Please indicate your agreement to the following statements

Looking back on HUM/APC and tertiary level online study as a whole, to what extent do these statements accurately reflect your experience?

1. Students are highly enthusiastic about the unit after completion
   (strongly disagree; disagree; neutral; agree; strongly agree)

2. Doing the unit transforms students’ thinking
   (strongly disagree; disagree; neutral; agree; strongly agree)

3. Unit content has value to life outside of academia
   (strongly disagree; disagree; neutral; agree; strongly agree)

4. The unit changes students’ self-perception in a positive way
   (strongly disagree; disagree; neutral; agree; strongly agree)

5. The unit is challenging but the challenges had beneficial outcomes
   (strongly disagree; disagree; neutral; agree; strongly agree)

6. Online study is a gateway to university opportunities
   (strongly disagree; disagree; neutral; agree; strongly agree)

7. Some technological and pedagogical problems are associated with online learning
   (strongly disagree; disagree; neutral; agree; strongly agree)

8. Students feel part of a learning community
   (strongly disagree; disagree; neutral; agree; strongly agree)

9. Tutors have an important supporting role
   (strongly disagree; disagree; neutral; agree; strongly agree)

10. Students’ personal determination was important to completion of the unit
    (strongly disagree; disagree; neutral; agree; strongly agree)

Please read through the questions below which will be discussed during the interview. You may like to jot down some notes in the space provided.

This part of the interview will primarily focus on your experience of continuing study after completing [ ]

Main points slightly paraphrased from interviews
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Q.</th>
<th>What do you hope to achieve for your future by undertaking university study? Have your goals changed since commencing your study?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Q.</td>
<td>How well do you feel [redacted] prepared you for your continuing university study? Please explain.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q.</td>
<td>How would you compare your continuing university experience to your experience in [redacted]?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q.</td>
<td>Have you completed the subsequent units towards your degree? If yes, what has helped you to persist? / If no, what influenced your decision to withdraw or postpone?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q.</td>
<td>How important to your experience of subsequent units has your involvement in the Blackboard discussions been? Why?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q.</td>
<td>How has the feeling of belonging to the university community been affected by progressing to different units? Why?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q.</td>
<td>To what extent have you had the support of family and friends as you have continued or discontinued your degree?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q.</td>
<td>How important to your continuing studies is your own personal determination? Why?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q.</td>
<td>What are the greatest challenges for you in continuing online tertiary study?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q.</td>
<td>What were the most helpful aspects for you in continuing online tertiary study?</td>
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<td>--------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
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<tr>
<td>A.</td>
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</table>
Tutor Follow-up Questions

Scaled questions: Please indicate your agreement to the following statements

These are the thematic statements which emerged from the interviews with tutors. Looking back on being a casual academic in the OUA versions of [ ] and casual online tutoring as a whole, to what extent do these statements accurately reflect your experience? Please highlight the relevant response.

Themes

1. There is negligible involvement in the collegial community, course feedback processes, and professional development for casual academics

(strongly disagree; disagree; neutral; agree; strongly agree)

2. Non-traditional students are extremely diverse and teaching them is both challenging and rewarding, particularly in OUA

(strongly disagree; disagree; neutral; agree; strongly agree)

3. Online learning is different to teaching on campus, with higher workloads and expectations from students, and higher attrition rates but rich opportunities for collaboration.

(strongly disagree; disagree; neutral; agree; strongly agree)

4. There is a lack of adequate training or preparation for teaching online despite its greater challenges and complexities, but effectiveness and quality of teaching remains high.

(strongly disagree; disagree; neutral; agree; strongly agree)

5. Causal tutors’ unstable and insecure working conditions have negative effects on their financial, professional, mental and physical wellbeing as well as adversely impacting the academy

(strongly disagree; disagree; neutral; agree; strongly agree)

The codes below were developed by grouping direct quotes from the tutor interviews and informed the thematic statements. Could you please indicated if you agree with each code by highlighting: Yes, No, or Unsure?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>Unsure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>The benefit of talking about and reflecting on teaching practice with colleagues</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Benefit of meeting with colleagues formally and/or informally for communication and sharing ideas etc</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lack of opportunity to participate in academic community and professional development</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Unsure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Section</td>
<td>Item</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Unsure</td>
</tr>
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<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>The need to set up own support as it is not offered by university</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Support linked to a particular coordinator rather than general faculty/school policy</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Unsure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lack of consistent presence on campus for tutors</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Unsure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Nature of university transition units as being complex/ difficult to teach</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Unsure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Diverse nature of OUA online students compared to face to face students</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Unsure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Non-traditional students bring rich life experience and more maturity to their learning</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Unsure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>A higher workload for online teaching / Online students expect more from tutors than face to face students</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Unsure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Online tutoring has some advantages over face to face tutoring in terms of workload</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Unsure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Requirements and results of online communication are different to the face-to-face classroom</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Unsure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The online environment offers opportunities for students to collaborate more richly than the face-to-face environment</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Unsure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Non-completion rate for online students is much higher than for face-to-face students</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Unsure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Lack of readiness to deal with online teaching</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Unsure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lack of or inadequateness of training to teach online</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Unsure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Technology is difficult for tutors and/or students, which can produce anxiety</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Unsure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Support from tutors important for some students to keep going</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Unsure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Goodwill of tutors to teach well</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Unsure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Casual academic status has a negative impact on sense of fulfilment professionally and personally</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Unsure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Don’t feel part of the university</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Unsure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Stressful and overwhelming/ Effect on physical health</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Unsure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lack of stability and negative impact on financial position</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Unsure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Need to take on a heavy workload to make a fulltime income</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Unsure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lack of notice and preparation for work offered</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Unsure</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Unsure</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>System of patronage for gaining work limits full potential</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Unsure</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sessional teaching is not a career path</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Unsure</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sessional teaching suits certain situations</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Unsure</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching expertise is drained from the university because of conditions of sessional work</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Unsure</td>
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</table>
Appendix D  Published Articles

Students flourish and tutors wither
A study of participant experiences in a first-year online unit

Andrea Dodo-Balu
Murdoch University School of Education

Contemporary higher education has been affected by policy pressures built around ‘flexibility’. The policies of widening student participation and expanding flexible online delivery combine to provide the opportunity for a university education for students hitherto largely excluded. Flexible employment policies have increasingly placed university teaching into the hands of casual tutors without permanent academic positions. This article contextualises and outlines initial findings from a qualitative case study of a first year, online unit which is a representative microcosm of the teaching and learning conditions produced by these pressures. While the students in the study felt able to enter the academic community successfully and experience empowering and transformational learning, the tutors felt disempowered and devalued with little hope for a future in the academy.

Keywords: Online learning; higher education policy; non-traditional students; first year; casualisation; sessional academics

Introduction
Flexibility is a key word in the contemporary higher education system in Australia. Flexible and diverse entry and exit points, as well as flexible forms of recognising learning, open up the possibility of attaining a university degree for students ‘...hitherto largely excluded from university attendance’ (Birrell & Edwards, 2009, p. 18). Flexible modes of course delivery centre on online learning and allow a further widening of access to university studies for students unable or unwilling to travel to and from campus (Norton, 2014), often due to location, employment and/or family commitments, or for medical reasons. An increase in university enrolments of ‘non-traditional’ students, particularly those classified as mature-age, regional or remote, low socio-economic status or with disabilities, has been one result. At the same time, government funding for higher education has been tightened and regulatory pressures have increased, requiring universities to adopt flexible workplace models (Percy & Beaumont, 2008). This has changed employment patterns at universities, with a decrease in permanent academic positions and a rise in the number of casual teaching staff, both in actual numbers and as a proportion of all teaching academics.

In 2010, the proportion of teaching only positions taken by casual staff was put at 86.5 per cent while 52 per cent of all university teaching was performed by casuals (National Tertiary Education Union, 2016). Australian higher education is therefore experiencing some of its most substantial growth in two groups which can be regarded as being on the periphery of the academy: non-traditional students and casual academic teachers. This article explores the literature on these trends, and contextualises and outlines findings from the initial stage of a case study into a first year, online unit.
pseudonymously named Academic Transition Unit or ATU100 for research purposes. This unit can be seen as a representative microcosm of the conditions produced by three major policy pressures centered on flexibility: the widening of student participation; the growth of flexible online delivery; and the casualisation of academic teaching. Using qualitative methods, the overall aim of the research is to develop an in-depth picture of how the participants in ATU100 experience contemporary higher education learning and teaching within the unit, and thus allow the effects of these pressures to become more apparent.

ATU100 is a compulsory first year unit focusing on academic conventions, offered online by a major Australian university through Open Universities Australia (OUA). The number of students studying degree courses fully online has grown significantly. According to Norton (2014), 18 percent of all higher education students were studying off-campus in 2013. This does not include students studying via a mix of off-campus and on-campus units. The option of studying their degrees online through avenues such as OUA is taken up by students who have widely varying reasons for preferring this mode of study on campus, creating an extremely diverse cohort. This increase in the number of online students has been accompanied by a corresponding growth in online university teaching, including the wide ranging employment of casual academics as online tutors. This is in line with the trend towards the use of casual teaching academics across universities. The proportion of university teaching carried out by casual academics is vanishingly small at between 21 per cent (Norton, 2013) and 53 per cent (Ryman et al., 2011). This discrepancy reflects casual academics' secondary status (Ryman et al., 2011) within the academy with several universities being unable to provide accurate data on the number of casual academics they employ or the conditions of their employment (Coates et al., 2005). In the case of ATU100, more than 90 per cent of the tutors are casuals.

The students and tutors involved in ATU100 represent two substantial groups who participate in a learning space on the edge of the academy created as a result of contemporary policy with its emphasis on flexibility. The literature points to major difficulties for both these groups.

From the literature

Challenges of online study

The growth in academic transition units such as ATU100 is largely due to the recognition that it can no longer be assumed that students entering university are equipped to succeed in their degrees. As stated by James (2010), ‘... universities must accept that one of their roles is to address shortfalls in schooling for some people’ (p. 10).

Findings by Capitt and Golshan (2015) suggest that online study may form a de facto equity pathway as students who are otherwise disadvantaged use online education as a gateway to university.

Such students are more likely to have a fragile self-belief about their capacity to succeed in an academic environment (Traksh & Lonergan, 2004, p. 85), less sense of belonging or fitting in at university (Berger, 2000), and to be intimidated and overwhelmed by their first year (McKean & Janus, 2001). Fully online students have the additional challenge of acquiring proficiency in navigating the online learning site, at the same time as they are developing academic competence (Bach et al., 2007). In response to the needs of non-traditional students, most universities offer physical spaces on campus where students can find academic support but these are not generally accessible to online students, putting them at a further disadvantage (Muldoon & Wijayarwanawe, 2012).

While the literature paints an overall bleak picture of the multiple challenges facing online students who are new to university, personal determination and a love of learning appear to be elements that can lead to student success (Stone, 2008).

Persistence and retention

It has been widely noted that the attrition levels in fully online courses are higher than in comparable courses in which students complete at least some of their studies on campus (Capitt & Golshan, 2015). However, Nichols (2010) discusses the complexity surrounding the issue of online student retention and how it can be measured, as well as the fact that a certain level of attrition is normal.

Personal determination is a key element cited by successful online students (Nichols, 2010; Beck & Milligan, 2014). Capitt and Golshan (2015) suggest that online students need more grit as well as greater institutional and peer support in order to overcome their greater challenges and achieve success. Also important to retention is a genuine excitement about the opportunity to participate in university study, which for many students is only possible through the online environment. Stone (2000) mentions a love of learning and the desire to continue, as well as feelings of independence, fulfillment, confidence and personal growth gained by mature-age students entering university via a non-traditional pathway. Mature-aged students are highly represented in ATU100.
The importance of the tutor for non-traditional, online students

The de facto pathway created by online learning results in a high proportion of non-traditional students in units such as ATU100. The literature suggests an increased importance of the tutor's role in enabling institutions to respond effectively to these students' needs. James (2010) asserts that new forms of pedagogy are required as students who do not meet institutions' current perceptions of university-level ability enter the academic community. York (2004) also mentions the need for radical changes in pedagogy in the context of mature-aged students, to provide the social element shown to be important in promoting retention (Tinto, 2007). Thus, the ability of the institution to design new pedagogies for non-traditional students, and of individual tutors to implement them, are important concerns for retention. Individual tutors are also shown to have a crucial role to play in supporting the self-belief of non-traditional students and helping them to understand university expectations (York, 2004; York & Longden 2004; Mclain & James, 2004).

In online learning environments, "...tutors... act as the human interface between the university and its students" (Quartermain et al., 2012, p. 65). The literature on online higher education emphasises teaching presence as being key to the quality of the student experience (Garrison et al., 2010). The instructor does not become less important in e-learning: students experience the instructors' support and expertise as especially important... (Parcher et al., 2010, p. 228). Thus, pedagogical and technological innovations (Garrison, 2011) are involved in the response to the growth of flexible online delivery. Participation in online learning spaces is a complex phenomenon (Hrabok, 2008). Bach et al. (2007) emphasise the need for suitably experienced facilitation of online learning, conceivably requiring time and the provision of quality professional learning to develop.

The casualisation of academic teaching

While the literature calls for a reflective, adaptable and innovative pedagogy to meet the needs of both non-traditional and online students, the prevalent use of casual teaching academics means that many online tutors are not given the opportunity to develop such attributes (Perry, 2008, 2008, Lazarfeld-Jensen & Morgan, 2009; Brown et al., 2010; Gottschalk & McFarlane, 2010). These tutors in units such as ATU100 often strive to develop their pedagogical skills in their own time and in isolation. Brown et al. (2010) state that 'unlike continuing or fixed- term staff, casual teaching staff are not paid to develop and maintain their knowledge base, yet are expected to deploy it in the teaching process' (p. 172). Percy and Beaumont (2008) problematise '...taking action on the issue of casualisation only in terms of the provision of adequate training...' (p. 150). They argue for holistic professional formation that includes casual academics within the collegial communities at the universities where they are engaged.

Instead, casual academics too often become deskilled and marginalised on the 'tenuous periphery' of scholarly life (Brown et al., 2010, p. 170) while uncertainty about ongoing employment and their reliance on prior relationships with unit coordinators for continuing work create a sense of financial and personal vulnerability (Brown et al., 2010; Gottschalk & McFarlane, 2010; Lazarfeld-Jensen & Morgan, 2009). Despite these adverse conditions, the risk casualisation poses to the individual worker barely rates a mention in government and university policy and guidelines (Perry & Beaumont, 2008, p. 147). Rather, discussions generally centre on the perceived risk that casualisation poses to the quality of teaching that students receive (Ryan et al., 2011).

The relevance of ATU100

The two pressures of widening student participation and delivering flexible online learning create the need for academic transition units that are taught fully online. The third pressure of casualising academic teaching ensures that casual tutors are highly represented amongst teaching staff. ATU100 encapsulates the conditions produced these three policy pressures in a bounded teaching and learning space providing a setting for investigating the type of experiences these conditions create for tutors and students. ATU100 is a large unit with the Open University versions regularly enrolling 500 to 600 students per study period. The majority of these students have been away from study for some time, and these students generally enrol in ATU100 as the

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first unit towards their bachelor degree, which makes it an important gateway to a positive and successful university experience. Given the potential problems emphasised in the literature, the student experience could be expected to be difficult, if not overwhelming. Nevertheless, findings suggest that ATU100 is meeting its aims for students, which centre on equipping them for successful entry into the academic community. This also suggests that tutors are delivering the unit successfully.

The interviews

Methodology

A qualitative interpretivist case study focusing on ATU100, this research aims to capture the experience of the unit participants in dealing with the effects of the three major pressures outlined above, using constructivist grounded theory for data analysis. Interpretivist research seeks to ‘... get into the head of the actor’ (Schwandt, 2000, p. 92) in order to gain a deep understanding of their lived experience. However, Laverty (2003) cautions that this understanding is necessarily combined with subjective meanings brought by the researcher, as the act of interpreting is influenced by their socio-historically inherited traditions and personal experiences (Laverty, 2003).

In addition to my role as researcher, I have participated in ATU100 as a tutor, adding a subjective, insider lens. Constructive grounded theory acknowledges the place of researcher subjectivity (Charmaz, 2014) in constructing theory from data and moves away from the positivist view that theory is something external to be discovered. Engaging with early findings is an important element of emerging design, a pivotal grounded theory strategy whereby the researcher uses constant analysis of data to inform and design the subsequent research stages. Initial sampling addresses the initial research questions to start the process of establishing theoretical categories and refining the research design according to established sampling criteria (Charmaz, 2014).

The sample

This phase involved a sample of three tutors and three students who had participated in ATU100, selected with both ethical and theoretical concerns in mind. The three tutors were chosen because they were not tutoring this specific unit at the time the research was conducted. This was a response to the ethical concern of a possible conflict of interest between their participation in the research and their interaction with current ATU100 students and colleagues.

The students in the sample had completed the unit previously and were chosen as a response to the theoretical evidence of the importance of personal determination and tutor support to perseverance in the online learning environment, as outlined above. All three students had expressed doubts to their tutor about their academic ability at an interim point in their study periods, but subsequently completed the unit successfully. The initial research stage has utilised in-depth interviews supported by statistical findings derived from larger external surveys. Findings have been grouped into the following emerging themes:

Online study is a gateway to university opportunities

The data provided by the students who formed the initial research sample paint a bright picture of the benefits to students provided by the policies of widening student participation and flexible online delivery. All three students were enthusiastic about the unit and the opportunity to study at university level, as comments from the interviews reveal. Student 1 (S1): ‘I think it’s an amazing unit’. Student 2 (S2): ‘It’s been wonderful for me’. Student 3 (S3): ‘Yes, very happy. I really enjoyed the course’. It was specifically the opportunity to study a degree online that enabled these students access to the university experience, supporting the contention that online study acts as a de facto equity pathway (Capitt & Gobalian, 2015).

S1 experiences health problems which make her intermittently house bound. S2 lives in a rural location, while S3 has been diagnosed with bipolar disorder which makes going to campus a stressful experience. In S3’s own words, ‘in spite of having greater stability if I attempted to do a real-time course rather than an online course... I think the pressures probably would have been too much for me even at this point. The flexibility of online study is also beneficial to these students. The online courses allow me to pace myself so as to minimise any disruption to my medical treatment’ (S1). It is easier to fit around my life... so it was my only option’ (S2).

Technical and pedagogical problems are associated with online learning

The online learning experience was not without its problems. S2 mentioned being scared off by the technological aspect of studying online for some time before taking the plunge and enrolling. ‘Technologically I think it was a huge challenge, and the lack of self-confidence in that sense...’. S1 felt ‘isolated and alone’ as an online student at times, and frustrated with the asynchronous nature of the learning site.
“Waiting for answers is the most difficult aspect of studying online (S3).”

Tutors also found the practical use of technology for online teaching to be a challenge. In their interviews, there was a sense of being thrown in at the deep end, with little or insufficient training. As a tutor (T1) put it in her interview, “I was just into this world…[where] I was expected to know what I was doing because I was the tutor of an online unit. T2 also felt unprepared, “I am reasonably technically proficient, I’m a bit of a geek but I still struggled.” T3 (T3) mentioned that the pedagogical aspects of the online environment were challenging at first, “When I first started I really just went in cold... It was difficult to know [what] should I spend time on...”

Online tutors have a heavier workload

The workload associated with online teaching and the expectation of being constantly available to students were other issues mentioned by the tutors. Finding that reflects other studies such as that undertaken by Tynan, Ryan and Lamber-Mills (2015). Despite having taught ATU100 face to face, T1 felt that she needed to start again from scratch when tutoring the unit online for the first time, “...because it was just so different... the hours I did for the hours I got paid would have been just dwarf.” T2 also felt that the hours she put into the unit were much more than she got paid for, “...but mentioned... it’s the same for internal tutoring.” T1 felt that online students were “more needy” in terms of constant attention. Students get upset with you because you don’t answer within the day... or the hour.” T3 also felt that online students were demanding, “...students... got quite annoyed that they couldn’t ring me and talk to me... rather than communicating via email.” However, casual tutors, particularly those who teach online, are not given space on campus or access to university phone lines. Communicating to students by phone would necessitate handing out personal numbers which tutors are reluctant to do. There is clearly frustration with the constraints of online learning being expressed on the students’ part. Pickering this frustration adds to the tutors’ workload, “...because you don’t know how to answer 50 emails... how to stop the train.” T3. In contrast, the students made no mention of a heavier workload associated with online study.

Students feel part of a learning community

Despite the drawbacks students associated with studying online, none of the students felt that these were significant impediments to their studies. In fact, there were aspects of the online learning experience that they particularly enjoyed, and all found it possible to feel part of a learning community. Due to having a mental illness, one of the reasons behind S3’s choice of online study was the desire to avoid studying in groups of people. Despite this, being in the learning community provided by the unit was something she found enjoyable, enriching and supportive. “I found it an amazing group of people... There was a feeling of being in a safety net... because there were these open-minded, sympathetic kind of people that were there to talk to if I needed it.”

Although S1 mentioned feeling isolated and alone during her interview, she also found that the real-time interactive sessions offered at intervals during the study period were effective in creating a sense of community. “It made me feel like I was actually part of a class rather than separate... It gave us a bit of camaraderie.” S2 found the engagement in the discussion area “...important because it enables you to feel part of the community just as effectively as in a face-to-face classroom. You don’t feel like you’re isolated out in the bush somewhere battling with the internet... there are actually people out there that you have... common ground with...”

There is certainly a sense of genuine connectedness with a learning community revealed through these comments. Students appreciated the richness provided by meeting and interacting with people with diverse life experiences, through the common bond of studying ATU100.

Tutors face a complex learning space with minimal support

For the tutors, the diversity of the students was seen as challenging. The OUA cohort comprised with on-campus students clearly presents tutors with a wider range of people and situations to manage, some of which can be quite extreme. “I had one [student] who was sleeping in her car, she’d been kicked out of her house, with two children...” (T3). There was a perceived lack of preparation in ways to manage the online, non-traditional cohort represented in the unit in comparison to on-campus students, and how to translate the teaching skills gained in the face to face classroom to the online environment. “I would have loved some pretraining in the technical aspects, and the nature of the teaching... it is a separate thing but it is all meshed together” (T1).

Formal opportunities to develop and reflect on the complex pedagogical aspects of their work seem to be completely lacking. Such opportunities would be welcomed, “... because then I could actually feel that I
was advancing my knowledge and my career... and getting acknowledged for it’ (T1). Instead there was ‘... maybe the odd coffee with the unit coordinator or the other tutors once in a while... but no formal avenue to discuss how it was all going’ (T3). Tutors felt devalued by the lack of opportunities afforded to them to develop as university educators. ‘The reluctance of the university system to invest in our futures and in professional development for us... reduces our ability to teach’ (T2). Tutors did, however, appreciate the richness of experience brought by the diversity of the OUA cohort. ‘It becomes more challenging to teach because you’re dealing with more diverse backgrounds, levels of experience... and it is more rewarding because of the same things’ (T1). They have so much more in their brains to bring to their education’ (T2).

**Tutors have an important supporting role**

Even though tutors are dealing with complex challenges within the online learning space with little preparation and almost no professional development opportunities, they still put in long hours and strive to do their best for their students... because you want to do a good job, that’s what you do’ (T1). Tutors found they needed to provide more emotional support and understanding to the OUA cohort. My support mostly comes of sending back emails that said ‘Don’t panic, remember to breath’, rather than ‘This is how you do it’ (T2). T3 felt the need to be different: things to different students as some ‘... need that continual support’.

The students interviewed found tutor support important to their experience in the unit. Both S1 and S3 considered dropping out at points during the study period. There were certainly times when I considered quitting not only the unit but the entire degree’ (S1). Amongst other things, ‘... personal emails to the tutor kept me going’ (S1). S3 found intensive tutor guidance at the start of the unit helped her cope with the more self-directed learning expected towards the end of the study period. S2 also appreciated the accessibility of her tutor, who “encouraged me beyond what I could imagine.”

**Students’ personal determination was important to completion of the unit**

The three students of the initial sample all found the learning community and tutor support to be beneficial aspects of their experience in ATU100. A further crucial element for persevering in the unit was their own personal determination, or grit. S3 felt she could link the strength gained from dealing with a mental illness to persistence in the unit. ‘I think it just gives you this inner determination or drive... to accomplish things’. For both S2 and S3, personal determination was a major driver that enabled them to complete the unit. ‘Persistence and determination... you’ve got to want it’ (S2).

Each student found the experience of completing the unit uplifting and empowering. Developing technological proficiency and coping with online learning, interacting with fellow students, discovering resilience and achieving success with challenging academic material all combined to transform students’ self-perceptions and their personal self-esteem, as well as how they see the world around them.

**Transformational learning was achieved by students**

In this way, it seems that transformational learning was achieved by the three students interviewed. According to Williams and Scary (2011), transformational learning occurs when students construct new meaning structures to make sense of their changing world and the changes within themselves. S1 valued the opportunity to ‘... challenge my preconceived ideas... and look through a different lens... at the world’. She found that the unit ‘... altered my perception of even who I am and where I fit within the social norms’. S3 also found the material really interesting, ‘to be able to figure out my viewpoints on a lot of things I hadn’t thought about in a while.’

S2 gained a new sense of self-confidence in her ability to articulate her ideas. ‘I feel now I have something to say... I’m not just a housewife who is dazed... I’m a different person now’. The students also experienced a great sense of personal achievement in completing the unit successfully. ‘It was fantastic! It was a really good... confidence boost to get that mark’ (S3). Despite doubts and challenges, the overall experience of the students interviewed in this initial research phase was one of empowerment.

**Tutors are disempowered**

This sense of empowerment and enhanced self-esteem was not an outcome shared by the tutors. In fact, the opposite seemed to be the case as tutors felt devalued and powerless across many aspects of their work. The tutors felt that the lack of opportunity to have a consistent presence on campus negatively impacted on both their teaching and their relationships with their colleagues within the academic community. ‘You don’t necessarily have the relationships with on campus people’ (T3). Tutors’ ongoing uncertainty about whether their work in
the unit would continue seemed to have a strong effect on
their emotional wellbeing: ‘You feel really slapped in
the face for that... I hate it’ (T1); ‘It doesn’t really seem fair... I
was hurt...’ (T3) and their financial wellbeing: ‘I don’t
have job security... so there’s the financial consequence
of not having secure employment’ (T2).

This uncertainty seemed to create a strong
feeling of powerlessness. All three tutors felt that
the allocation of work was based on a unit coordinator’s
arbitrary preferences rather than experience or merit.
T1 felt her years of experience in both on-campus and
online teaching was invisible to the university: ‘You get
more and more experience but you actually get no recognition
for that at all. If formal recognition of teaching excellence
does occur, it seems to have no bearing on allocation
of work, as T3’s experience demonstrates. I’ve had an award
for professionalism, I’ve also
had the OUA tutor award, I’ve
worked as a coordinator... Now [the unit] has gone
through another revolution and a new unit coordinator... so
I’m not being offered the work! University teaching
...operates informally on a
system of patronage’ (T2).

Building and maintaining relationships is vital. However, if unit
coordinators move on or are replaced, the relationships vanish
with them. The rewards of being a casual tutor appear to be limited to personal satisfaction
for teaching well. T3 says, ‘I keep coming back because I
actually enjoy teaching. However, this type of satisfaction
has its limits and all three tutors felt that there was no future
for them in university teaching. As T2 noted, ‘people move on... away from teaching. People leave academia.’

Statistical findings

Data from the Online Learner Engagement Survey 2014-
2015 conducted by National Centre for Student Equity in
Higher Education (used with permission) and from the
ATU100 online learning site suggest that the positive
outcomes that emerged from the student interviews are
reflective of the wider unit cohort. The three students
interviewed fit with the primary demographic traits
of the cohort, and their successful completion of
the unit is widely shared by students who begin ‘genuine
participation’ in the unit as defined below. A large survey
of casual staff conducted in 2014 by Voice Project (used
with permission) at the university which offers the unit
confirms that the concerns expressed by the tutors who
were interviewed are also widely shared.

The student cohort

Information and a link to the Online Learner Engagement
Survey was posted on the unit’s online site across an
eighteen-month period resulting in 126 responses from
ATU100 students. The results show that the OUA version
of the unit enrols a very different age group from the
on-campus version where the majority of students are
still school leavers. Of the respondents, students over the
age of 25 accounted for 78% per cent of the cohort, with
the largest numbers in the 30 to 40 age group. Three-
quarters of respondents were female. All three students
interviewed fit this demographic. The survey data also
suggest the OUA course cohort contains a higher portion
of students with other important commitments in
life besides study, which also
emerged from the interviews.
Information on educational
attainment support the idea
that the OUA students have
been away from study for
some time.

In addition, 57 per cent
of respondents indicated that they were the first in their
family to study at university. These figures point to a large
number of ATU100 students being initially unfamiliar with
contemporary university level study. Further to this, 61 per
cent of respondents indicated that they were mostly new
to the subject of their degree, highlighting the importance
of the transition phase provided by ATU100. The students
interviewed had all been away from study for a number
of years, and welcomed the transitional aspect of the unit.
S1 was first in family and new to university study, S2 had
completed a degree, but in a very different field, while S3
had twice attempted university study but had withdrawn.

Retention and attrition

The figures from the online learning site of one study
period were analysed, and are closely representative
of other study periods for ATU100 and indeed OUA
in general. At first glance the attrition rate is alarming.
For the study period in question, of all the students
who enrolled in the unit, only 39 per cent completed,
indicating a 61 per cent attrition rate. However, a closer
look raises the question as to whether many of the
carried out respondents had any real intention of participating.
Seventeen per cent of the students never logged into
Blackboard, while a further 20 per cent never submitted assignments. Thus, 47 per cent of enrolling students did not begin what could be considered as full participation in the unit. This may indicate that some students have different reasons for enrolling in the unit than a firm decision to undertake a degree.

Taking the remaining students, who attempted at least the first assignment, as the participating cohort, the rate of non-completion falls to 28 per cent. This supports the contention of Nichols that the complexity surrounding student retention must be taken into account when attempting to understand the online student experience. ‘Difficulties arise in terms of who to count as having dropped out’ (Nichols, 2010, p. 95). While the literature indicates significant challenges for non-traditional, online students, the statistics from the study period analyzed suggest students were able to overcome these challenges and achieve success in the unit. The majority of students who demonstrated an intention to participate experienced success in this study period, reflective of the students who were interviewed.

Tutor dissatisfaction

The 2014 survey of casual staff conducted at the university which offers the unit reveals that the dissatisfaction expressed the tutors who participated in the research is common. The survey was conducted online and received 353 responses. Staff were asked to respond to a range of statements using a five-point Likert scale. Regarding reasons for choosing casual teaching, the highest agreement was given to a statement describing the satisfaction gained from helping students learn, which is reflective of interview responses.

In the overall survey, the two lowest rates of agreement were in the category of career opportunities, specifically the lack of a career path and of opportunities for permanent positions. Fairness and equity, pay and recognition, and workload and wellbeing, were the other categories which garnered very low rates of agreement, detailing a lack of consistency with how staff are managed, not being valued by the university, and a lack of commitment to staff wellbeing. These responses are entirely consistent with the concerns mentioned by the research participants.

Discussion

The three flexibility pressures which are highlighted by the unit widening student participation, online delivery and casualisation of academic teaching, seem to have impacted the tutors in the study more negatively than the students. The literature suggests that non-traditional online students who are new to university face multiple challenges. Initial findings from the case study indicate that for some students these challenges can be successfully overcome. The fragile self-belief of students reported in the study by Yorke and Longden (2004) can be strengthened and transformed, as they successfully manage feelings of being intimidated and overwhelmed (McJames & James, 2000) by their first university experience, and discover themselves to be capable of persevering and completing the unit to a high standard. The literature points out potential problems for non-traditional, online students in developing a sense of belonging to the university community (Berger, 2000). However, the students interviewed were able to share a sense of supportive camaraderie with their peers through the online learning site. Pedagogical challenges in meeting the needs of online and non-traditional students (James, 2010; Yorke, 2000) appear to have been met successfully within the unit, as students’ comments showed high levels of satisfaction with the unit content, as well as the support offered by their tutors. The statistics from a typical study period indicate that a good proportion of participating students can be successful in the unit, which may indicate that the experience of the students who were interviewed is more widely shared.

Given the greater complexities afforded by units such as ATU100, and the lack of opportunities given to casual tutors to develop their professional skills in response, it appears that tutors are donating significant amounts of their own time to achieve a quality experience for their students. This suggests that personal goodwill rather than institutional strategy is being used to ensure the quality of teaching provided by casual tutors. However, this brings significant personal cost to the individual tutors as revealed through the interviews above. Concerns about poor working conditions for casual academic teachers are expressed repeatedly in the literature (Brown et al., 2010; Gottschalk & Mellaichem, 2010; Lazarfeld Jensen & Morgan, 2009; Junor, 2003), yet clearly persist for the tutors who were interviewed. As a result, tutors felt isolated and devalued and saw little hope for their future in academia.

Conclusion

ATU100 is a unit in which the effects of contemporary higher education policies centre on flexibility in...
teaching and learning are revealed. While the sample investigated here is very small, given the comparisons with wider surveys, these findings are likely to reflect more general, wider students and staff attitudes. For students, policies of widening student participation and online access to university study have facilitated successful entry into the academic community and allowed them to experience transformational learning. Theoretical sampling through the case study’s subsequent stages will need to focus on more diverse student experience in an attempt to understand why students enrol but do not participate in the unit, or start participation but do not complete. The extent to which the positive results expressed by the three students in this initial research stage are shared by other successful students in the unit also needs further investigation.

Workplace flexibility does not seem to have negatively affected the quality of teaching in ATU100, but has had a positive effect on the quality of the professional experience for the three tutors interviewed, as well as on their personal self-esteem and optimism for the future. Again, it will be important to ascertain how widely this experience is shared by other tutors in the unit, and colleagues in similar employment situations. While it seems clear that contemporary employment practices at universities have a deep impact on casual teaching academics, the extent to which permanent academic staff and those on short-term contracts are affected also needs to be considered.

Further in-depth interviews for all the participants in the initial research phase will be important, as with the constructive grounded theory method. For the students, these interviews should show whether their experience in ATU100 has consolidated into continuing successful university study, and for the tutors, they may reveal whether they have persevered with university teaching or taken their expertise to different fields of employment. For both groups, the ongoing effects of the policies which create the perceptual space they occupy may then be further brought to light.

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References


RESEARCH PAPER

Fairness and inclusion: Online learning as an enabler of Australian higher education policies aimed at student equity and social justice

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Building social justice through access to higher education is a central concern for many universities across the world. In Australia, as elsewhere, online delivery of degree programs provides an important avenue to implement government policies aimed at both increasing overall participation in higher education and widening the participation of students from disadvantaged backgrounds. These twin aspects of higher education policy reflect two differing models for achieving student equity in higher education; one which emphasises fairness and the other, inclusion. Using a qualitative research lens, this paper looks at the place of online study within a discussion of these two equity models and related social justice theories, supported by insights into the student experience gleaned from a small case study of a first-year online unit. The fairness model of student equity, with its focus on equitable distribution, is well supported by the unit’s high proportion of disadvantaged students. Yet it is the inclusion model, which provides room to go beyond the numbers and recognise the justice experienced by these students on an individual level, that more closely aligns with the transformative value that completing students report deriving from access to online study. Amartya Sen’s writings on social justice are foregrounded throughout the paper.

Keywords: online learning; higher education policy; student equity; social justice; widening participation; Amartya Sen

Introduction

Over recent decades, higher education policies throughout much of the world have promoted the expansion of student participation at universities to address issues of social justice, with an emphasis on students from disadvantaged and low socio-economic backgrounds (Wilson-Strydom, 2015, p. 143). Released in 2009, the policy document, Transforming Australia’s Higher Education System (Australian Government, 2009), positioned student equity as a central concern for Australian universities. The policy introduced a demand-driven funding system, with the removal of caps on student numbers in many university courses (James, 2010); and a performance-based funding system, linked to the success of universities in attracting enrolments from specific categories of disadvantaged students (Gale & Tranter, 2011). Since 2009, changes in government and political focus have increasingly put the commitment to widening student participation contained in this policy under threat (Department of Education and Training, 2018). An internationally recognised rationale for increased student access is the role that higher
education plays in promoting justice on a societal and individual level (Goastellec, 2008). In the global field, building social justice through access to higher education has become an indicator of reputable institutions, providing “an international standard ... [and] a key point in the legitimating process of higher education policies and comparisons” (Goastellec, 2008, p. 72).

Therefore, the implementation of policies for increasing and widening student participation is an important concern for universities, both financially and in terms of reputation. Since many universities offer fully online or blended courses as an “institutional innovation related to enrolment growth” (Taylor & Holley, 2009, p. 81), online learning may also be viewed as an enabler of these policies. Drawing on Amartya Sen’s (2009) writings on justice and associated educational theories, this paper is concerned with relating students’ experiences of online learning to equity in higher education and the socially just society which government policies seek to promote.

**Online learning, student equity and social justice**

Online course delivery provides an avenue for universities to implement policies on equity in higher education by giving the opportunity of a university education to a diverse range of students who would otherwise be excluded (Stone, O’Shea, May, Delahunty, & Partington, 2016). Online learning has grown exponentially throughout the world with countries across all continents and economic conditions having online higher education platforms (International Council for Open and Distance Education, n.d.). The choice to study online is often made for reasons that preclude attendance on campus, such as home location, employment obligations, family commitments, and medical related issues. This can result in a higher proportional representation of ‘equity’ students in online units. There is a strong alignment with the target equity groups defined in Australian government policy as being under-represented in higher education, particularly “people from low socio-economic status (SES) backgrounds; people from rural and remote locations, [and] people with a disability” (Downing, 2017, p. 20). This alignment is amplified when admission is also open access (Stone et al., 2016), which allows students to enrol without meeting course pre-requisites and is a characteristic of units offered by universities through Open Universities Australia (OUA). Consequently, online, open-access units are illustrative of the push to increase and widen access to higher education, with indications that online learning can impact students’ lives in significant and transformative ways (Devlin & McKay, 2016).

The current higher education funding model in Australia still has its basis in the 2009 policy, *Transforming Australia’s Higher Education System*. Funding mechanisms outlined in the policy reflect two differing theoretical models for achieving student equity in higher education, one which emphasises fairness and the other, inclusion (Marginson, 2011a). The policy promotes fairness with a target of 20% of all students in higher education to be drawn from the lowest SES category by 2020. Inclusion, on the other hand, aims to raise the overall proportion of young Australians (24-35) with a bachelor level qualification to 40% by 2040 (Australian Government, 2009), with an increase in the participation of low SES students as a result. Thus, the focus of the fairness model is on a more equal proportional distribution of student places amongst social groups while the inclusion model emphasises enrolment growth as a whole. Significantly, for the prescribed expansion of enrolments to be achieved, the inclusion target itself requires “the recruitment of young people from social strata hitherto largely excluded from university attendance” (Birrell & Edwards, 2009, p. 8). Therefore, inclusion, too, is “linked tightly with equity” (James, 2010, p. 3). Marginson (2011a) claims that strategies for inclusion allow a “focus on strengthening the human agency of persons hitherto excluded” (p. 27) and places this model in line with Sen’s (2009) ideas on social justice and the importance of a focus on the individual rather than on institutional characteristics alone.
This paper aims to situate the opportunities that online learning affords within a discussion of the two equity models and related social justice theories, supported by insights into the student experience derived from a qualitative case study of a first-year online unit. This small case study provides a means for the student voice to be heard within the discussion. Pseudonymously named ATU100 for research purposes, the unit is offered by a large public university through OUA. Generally taken as a first unit towards a Bachelor of Arts degree, the unit is designed to facilitate students’ transition into university level study and equip them for academic success. It therefore provides an ideal site for examining how student equity policies play out in the lives of new-to-university, online students. Online learning must not only facilitate access but should also offer students opportunities for increased justice in their lived experience if we are to consider this mode of delivery as playing a role in levelling the social justice related aims underpinning policies of student equity. The fairness model is well supported by the unit’s high proportion of students who fall into the equity categories outlined above. Yet, as the following discussion proposes, it is the inclusion model with its emphasis on the justice actually experienced by individuals that more closely aligns with the transformative value that completing students report deriving from participation in the unit. It is also proposed that the value of inclusion extends beyond the student age range prescribed in the 2009 policy to mature age students who may have faced barriers to university study caused by past educational disadvantage.

**Theoretical framework**

The ‘fairness’ and ‘inclusion’ goals of Australian higher education policy outlined above reflect contrasting equity models. According to Sen (2009), fairness draws on what he calls the theory of *transcendental institutionalism*, which firstly “concentrates its attention on what it identifies as perfect justice” (p. 5) and, secondly, “on getting institutions right” (p. 6). The focus is on institutional characteristics and what these might look like when a just situation is reached. Thus, the 20% target for low SES student participation is set as the ideal arrangement by which “equity is seen to be achieved once students have entered in the right proportions” (Gale, 2012, p. 254). This *arrangement-focused* view of justice aligns with the distributive justice paradigm, which aims to quantify fair proportional distribution as a way of addressing equity issues. Gewirtz (1998) suggests that distributive justice is the conventional conception and is commonly seen as “synonymous with social justice” (p. 470). Online learning contributes to distributive justice in higher education by allowing students who find it difficult to attend campus the opportunity to enrol at university.

One problem with this paradigm is that theories of distributive justice tend to focus on the ‘ideal’ (Wilson-Strydom, 2015), which as Sen (2009) notes, is unlikely to be agreed upon or achieved. Marginson (2011a) asserts that difficulties in achieving the ideal create the risk of equity policy being seen as a failure even when advances have been made. Another problem with this approach is its lack of attention to the individual. Distributive justice characterises equitable access to higher education according to defined social categories (Gale & Tranter, 2011) without considering the human complexities and differences within these groups (Wilson-Strydom, 2015). Naylor and James (2015) point out the considerable differences between different equity groups in terms of enrolment growth since 2009 and question whether “defining social inclusion via group membership is the best method of pursuing equity in higher education” (p. 2). Similarly, Sen (2009) questions the adequacy of an arrangement-focused view of justice: “The question to ask in this context is whether the analysis of justice must be so confined to getting the basic institutions and general rules right? Should we not also have to examine what actually emerges in society, including the kind of lives people actually lead…?” (p. 10).
The inclusion model of Australian higher education policy concerns the goal of increasing the overall participation of students in higher education, bringing about the expansion of places for low SES students as part of this overall increase. The inclusion model is proposed as more feasible and achievable than the fairness model (Marginson, 2011a). Its major value lies in the room it provides to shift the focus away from seeing disadvantaged students in terms of numbers, towards seeing them as people whose experiences of higher education are individual. Inclusion aligns well with Sen’s view of social justice (Sen, 2009); his idea of social realisations, concerned with “the lives that people can actually live” and the “capabilities that people actually have” (p. 19), and his notion of capabilities, describing an individual’s freedom and ability to be or do “what he or she has reason to value” (p. 231). In the higher education context, an emphasis on capabilities aligns with recent theories regarding wider student participation, such as Third Generation Transition (T3) (Gale & Parker, 2014) and Southern Theory (Gale, 2012), which emphasise the need to move beyond numerical, point of entry models for determining the success of student equity policy. Rather, students’ lives must be “seen inclusively” (Sen, 2009, p. 19) with the concern on fostering their actual capacities, particularly of those who are victims of injustice (Marginson, 2011a). The inclusion of older students in the equity discussion, whose circumstances may have previously prevented university attendance, is consistent with the idea of correcting injustice. The inclusion model ascribes value to higher education for its ability to enhance the individual agency of a diverse range of students, as well as for its contribution to wider society. It is the importance of a focus on inclusion which emerges most strongly from the case study of ATU100 discussed in the section below.

Methodology and the research process

The focus of this paper lies in linking theories of social justice through higher education to the lived experiences of those who have gained access to university study via online delivery. While discussions of theories and policies are important, exploring these discussions from the perspective of participants imparts deeper meaning (O’Shea, 2014). Qualitative perspectives may be missing from accounts of policy since they are “more invisible, personal and difficult to measure” (Gale, 2014, p. 262) than quantitative accounts. This paper aims to contribute to the visibility of such perspectives, by focusing on the experiences of twelve online students within a qualitative, instrumental case study of ATU100. While the number of case study participants is small, their voices lend a powerful first-hand frame of reference to this discussion and may also, by extrapolation, provide insight into the experiences of students in similar circumstances.

Qualitative/interpretivist research methods aim to develop an in-depth and nuanced understanding of research participants’ experiences (Creswell, 2008). An insider lens is added here through the author’s involvement in the unit as a member of teaching staff, with the aim of allowing this subjective experience to play a positive role in the search for meaning (Laverty, 2003). Constructivist Grounded Theory is a method of data analysis which acknowledges the place of researcher subjectivity (Creswell, 2008). Charmaz (2014) describes this method as moving away from the positivist view that meaning is something external to be discovered. Rather, understanding is a construction between the research participants and the researcher via the researcher’s interpretation. Charmaz (2014) acknowledges that elements of Constructivist Grounded Theory may be adopted and adapted to suit ‘diverse studies’ (p. 16).

This research utilised the Grounded Theory elements of initial sampling and emerging design. The first phase of the research involved a pilot study which utilised initial sampling to identify potential themes and inform the research design. Emerging design was used throughout the study and describes a process by which the researcher collects data, immediately analyses it, and subsequently makes decisions about the next step in the research process (Creswell, 2008).
Emerging design allows the researcher to remain responsive to the data. This approach enabled a change of focus towards the development of themes, rather than a theory, as the end point of the research (Charmaz, 2014). It was found that themes could link more readily to broader macro policies, consistent with an instrumental case study (Stake, 2005). Thematic analysis was then introduced into the study, which is described as “the search for and identification of common threads that extend throughout a set of data” (Kehrwald, 2008, p. 93). Themes are comprised of these threads of underlying meaning subject to abstract conceptualisation (Vaimoradi, Jones, Turunen, & Snelgrove, 2016).

The research participants and data collection process
Overall, the case study consisted of twelve students who had previously participated in the unit in one of six study periods across 2013-2016. ATU100 runs across all four study periods of the OUA academic year. Details in the table below were given by students in pre-interview questionnaires.

Table 1: Participant characteristics (n=12)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Study Period</th>
<th>Age Group</th>
<th>Income Bracket</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Highest level of previous study</th>
<th>Time away from study</th>
<th>Reason for choosing to study online</th>
<th>Successful (completed and passed)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Moira</td>
<td>SP3 2013</td>
<td>46-55</td>
<td>Lowest</td>
<td>Major metro</td>
<td>Bachelor degree attempted</td>
<td>9 years</td>
<td>Requires ongoing medical treatment</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Melissa</td>
<td>SP2 2014</td>
<td>46-55</td>
<td>Lowest</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>Bachelor degree completed</td>
<td>22 years</td>
<td>Rural location and family commitments</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amanda</td>
<td>SP3 2014</td>
<td>26-35</td>
<td>Not given</td>
<td>Major metro</td>
<td>Bachelor degree attempted</td>
<td>15 years</td>
<td>Disability (bipolar disorder) and single mother</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Louise</td>
<td>SP2 2015</td>
<td>50-65</td>
<td>Highest</td>
<td>Major metro</td>
<td>Bachelor degree attempted</td>
<td>20 years</td>
<td>Carer for insolvent and two children with disabilities</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ayla</td>
<td>SP2 2015</td>
<td>66-75</td>
<td>Lowest</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>Bachelor degree attempted</td>
<td>40 years</td>
<td>Too far from nearest university to commute</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joanna</td>
<td>SP3 2015</td>
<td>36-45</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Major metro</td>
<td>High school completed</td>
<td>20 years</td>
<td>Disabled single mother and two of her children have disability</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elise</td>
<td>SP3 2015</td>
<td>46-55</td>
<td>Lowest</td>
<td>Major metro</td>
<td>Bachelor degree completed</td>
<td>17 years</td>
<td>Bedridden with degenerative disease</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christiana</td>
<td>SP1 2016</td>
<td>18-25</td>
<td>Lowest</td>
<td>Remote</td>
<td>High school completed</td>
<td></td>
<td>School leaver, Remote location/primary carer for disabled mother/ suffers from ill health</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1 Students’ names have been altered and no personal identifiers have been used.
Students were emailed a pre-interview questionnaire consisting of a mix of open-ended questions and statements with Likert-scale responses, along with an invitation to participate in one or more interviews. A mix of purposeful sampling and broad-based sampling was used throughout the research process. The first three students listed in the table were involved in the initial sampling of the pilot study. Broad-based sampling followed, with emails being sent to approximately 350 students in two study periods to which four students responded. Purposeful sampling was then used to seek out specific types of students; both to confirm findings that were emerging from the study, and to seek out those not yet adequately represented, namely non-completers, male students and school leavers. Twenty-three students were identified by the researcher and were sent personalised emails, resulting in five new participants. Of the twelve participants, eight consented to be interviewed while four made written contributions. The interviews lasted from 45-60 minutes and were conducted and recorded using online conferencing software and subsequently transcribed. An initial table of themes was then developed using quotes from the interviews. These themes were sent to the participants for checking through a follow-up questionnaire. The research participants were also asked to give permission for their reflective journals, completed as a unit assessment, to be analysed for correspondence to the themes in order to gain a real-time perspective on their experiences. The written texts from the interview transcripts, questionnaires and journals were then re-analysed to produce the final themes. Through these processes, data was triangulated for trustworthiness (Creswell, 2008).

With the small number of participants, these qualitative themes enable students’ individual experiences to remain visible while signalling the commonalities between them. The majority of the students who participated in the research were mature age females who completed the unit successfully. They were the most enthusiastic responders to the research invitation. It proved more difficult to obtain responses from non-completing students. One non-completer responded in the broad-based sampling phase and was interviewed. The other non-completer responded to a targeted personal email and gave permission for her email reply to be used in the research but declined further participation. In response to personal emails, one male student agreed to participate via questionnaire only, and the school leaver agreed to full participation after receiving a targeted email. For this reason, the findings here may be less indicative of the experiences of these types of students.

The overarching research question addressed by the research was:

- To what extent are the objectives of ATU100 students met through their experience of studying online and what does this imply for equity and social justice?

Themes and findings from the case study include:

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2 Technical and Further Education institution
Online study is the means for students to gain access to a degree: All the research participants stated that they could only access university study via online delivery.

Students are highly enthusiastic about the unit after completion: Research participants found the unit to be enjoyable and extremely helpful in their transition to university study. Students used superlatives such as wonderful, grateful, and fabulous to describe their feelings after completing the unit.

The unit is challenging but the challenges had beneficial outcomes: Research participants found that overcoming the challenges of adjusting to the scholarly terminology and content that they were introduced to in the unit gave them a sense of achievement, and important skills for further study.

Interaction with peers can create a sense of being in a learning community: Research participants reported feeling supported and welcomed by their peers.

Support from others involved in the unit helps students to persevere but personal determination is the key element for successful completion: Research participants indicated that support from teaching staff and peers was important but personal determination was the most critical attribute that enabled them to persevere.

The unit may transform students’ thinking and self-perceptions in positive ways: Research participants reported seeing the world and their place within it in new ways as a result of their access to university study and their achievement in the unit.

It was the emergence of these positive themes from the case study which led the author to a deeper exploration of theories of equity and social justice in higher education and how they pertain to online learning which is further discussed below.

Relating social justice to online learning: The literature and the student voice

By joining together the literature, most notably Sen’s (2009) The Idea of Justice, and the student voice that emerged from the case study of ATU100, this section analyses the relationship between online learning in higher education and ideas of equity and social justice. Concerns about student attrition are addressed first followed by a deeper exploration of the two equity models, fairness and inclusion.

Attrition concerns
Stone (2017) notes that perseverance is more difficult in online environments with the rate of degree completion for online students significantly lower than that of on-campus students. This is a key concern raised in relation to online study which challenges the idea of online learning as an equity enabler. Yet, as Nichols (2010) points out, the measurement of attrition in online courses is complex. For example, it is difficult to determine who should be counted in attrition numbers since it is more likely that students may “drop out before the course even begins” (p. 95) in the online environment, which can falsely inflate these figures. This indicates that some students may enrol in the unit without making a firm commitment to study or with no clear idea as to the nature and requirements of online study prior to enrolment. The latter appears to be the case for Elise, who was interviewed as a non-completer. Elise is bedridden with illness but wanted to keep her intellect sharp. After she was given a second-hand iPad, she decided to enrol in ATU100 and start a university degree. During her interview, she expressed confusion about online study which was primarily caused by her inadequate technology. She stated: “I didn’t know the ins and outs of how to do it. It didn’t work out”.

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In the context of open access online learning, Tresman (2002) challenges the perception that all attrition is negative. Non-completing students may be involved in movement across courses and institutions or may judge that they have met their personal objectives before formal completion. This acknowledges the agency of individuals to make their own choices in ways that have value to them. Having the possibility to choose is an important aspect of social justice as “being able to reason and choose is a significant aspect of human life” (Sen, 2009, p. 18). It should be noted, however, that respect for students’ choices needs to be go beyond the provision of access. Georgiana, one of the non-completing participants, was deeply distressed by an administrative requirement to remain enrolled in the unit towards a fail result, when personal circumstances forced her to stop participating late in the study period: “I feel punished and completely inadequate”. Georgiana’s response indicates an experience quite different to the positive accounts given by other participants. However, other negative experiences with online study are largely hidden from the research due to the difficulties of getting non-completers involved.

**Fairness: an arrangement-focused view**

The fairness aspect of higher education policy includes the goal of a 20% representation of low SES students within the student body (Australian Government, 2009). Online access opens up higher education to many students who would otherwise be excluded through a diverse range of circumstances, including disadvantage due to disability, remoteness, work and/or caring responsibilities, and so on. All the research participants stated that online, flexible learning was their only enrolment option. As Joanna summed up: “Basically, if the units weren’t offered online I wouldn’t be able to study”. It follows, then, that online learning is one mode of delivery where the 20% goal is often exceeded, with students from low SES and other disadvantaged backgrounds “represented particularly strongly in online undergraduate programs” (Stone, 2017, p. 5). The findings from the ATU100 case study show that students derive a sense of belonging from being in a learning community where students share similar backgrounds and experiences. Research participants reported that they did not feel out of place but rather felt accepted and supported by their peers. For instance, Ayla stated: “You didn’t feel like you were the only one in that – sort of – age group or with those kinds of experiences”. The fragile self-belief that is common amongst equity students (Willans & Seary, 2011) was to some extent ameliorated by having these feelings widely shared by fellow students. This helped overcome the isolation often associated with online learning as students had the confidence to interact, as Janelle stated: “Just knowing that people are...lost and unsure...like I was, is very comforting and made me want to get online as often as I could to offer my advice and ideas to others”. The presence of higher proportions of equity students in the online learning community also works to remove the stigma these students may suffer on campus. For example, Mallman and Lee (2016) describe mature age students on campus as being “disadvantaged by an identity that is marginalised” (p. 687) compared to the traditional school-leaver identity, particularly because many of these older students also “represent historically marginalised demographics” (p. 690). It is disadvantaged students who are the most likely to experience a sense of socio-cultural incongruity in the academic environment, which can hinder their success (Devlin, 2013). Online learning can provide an environment where the marginalised become the majority group, allowing greater confidence.

These types of individual experiences are peripheral to the considerations of the fairness/distributive justice paradigm, however, which concentrates almost exclusively on proportional representation at point of entry (Gale, 2012). There are also concerns that the over-selection required to shift proportional distribution can lead to claims that equity students lack merit (Marginson, 2011a), producing a deficit conception. This deficit model creates a perceived need for equity students to change to suit the academy and leaves aside ideas about how these
students may themselves change and enhance the academy. This creates a discourse of inadequacy surrounding equity students (Smit, 2012) which gives little regard to the quality of knowledge and experience that these students can contribute (Gale, 2012). The implicit risk is that online learning, with its higher representation of equity students, could be perceived as a second-tier form of higher education. It is thus highly important to consider the quality of online students’ experiences subsequent to enrolment, rather than access alone. It is also important not to dismiss expansion in the overall participation of low SES students when the proportional distribution may show little change (Marginson, 2011a). As Sen (2009) proposes, the value of access to higher education may be seen through the expansion of individual capabilities “even if there is no distributional gain” (p. 298).

Inclusion: a social realisations view

The inclusion model for furthering student equity in higher education takes the focus off proportional distribution of places and allows room to look beyond the numbers of equity students an institution enrolls to the experiences of the individuals themselves. We can then perceive the effects of access to higher education in students’ lives, following Sen’s (2009) concept of social realisations which “demands that outcomes be seen in these broader terms” (p. 217). The focus shifts to individual capabilities, a term used by Sen (2009) to describe the freedom derived from “substantive opportunities” (p. 287), such as those provided by online access. While the common experiences shared by members of socially disadvantaged groups cannot be discounted entirely, the inclusion approach allows recognition of the individual diversity within these groups and the importance of individual gains; “what they learn, the effects in person formation and in labour market outcomes” (Marginson, 2011a, p. 35). This thinking is in line with Sen’s (2009) emphasis on justice that is “linked to the world that actually emerges, not just the institutions or rules we happen to have” (p. 20).

In the educational context, understanding individual difference and agency is critical as a student’s “specific personal, social, economic and familial context may be quite different from the context of other group members” (Wilson-Strydom, 2015, p. 148). There is a need to move away from perceiving equity students “according to pre-determined expectations rather than individual circumstances” (O’Shea, Lysaght, Roberts, & Harwood, 2016, p. 330). Further, the label of ‘equity student’, as applied to specific social groups, may not match students’ own self-perceptions (Trowler, 2015). Online learning allows students to disclose as much or as little of themselves as they wish. As trust grows in the learning community, more of their personal identities may be shared. This is shown through the students’ voices; for example, “I transformed from a student unable to participate, to one who really looked forward to reading and participating in the discussion threads” (Joanna) and “I tend to be an introvert, I can live without human contact. But I think for those days when things are harder it helps to have that human contact, to know that you aren’t alone” (Christiana).

The inclusion model acknowledges the “heterogeneity of experience and understanding” (Trowler, 2015, p. 11) inherent in higher education spaces, and sees students as whole people with unique backgrounds, experiences and world-views (Gale & Parker, 2014). Inclusion is furthered through a two-way process of change and development between institution and students (Devlin, 2013). Institutions hold the responsibility to adapt to the realities of students’ lives and foster inclusion for diverse students by “creating collaborative and inclusive spaces, in which students are encouraged to share their beliefs, knowledge and experiences” (Devlin, 2013, p. 948). Responses from research participants indicate that online learning offers a way for this to be achieved: “It taught me that it’s okay to have an opinion, and it’s okay to express it, but you need to do it in a way that is...constructive” (Joanna); “The [courses] I have been successful
at have provided an exciting environment where ideas can be discussed without prejudice or ill-feeling” (Louise). Online learning can meet students where they are currently placed, allowing participation in ways that suit the student considering their individual circumstances and the personal barriers they may have. As Moira shared, “I suffer ill health...I don’t know from one day to the next how I will be feeling. The online courses allow me to pace myself so as to minimise any disruption to my medical treatment”. Amanda, who has bipolar disorder, described her experience: “…making [study] work for myself...Getting rid of the idea that I had to do it a certain way and I can’t do it the way I need to do it”.

Inclusion allows a focus on “the prevention of manifest injustice, rather than seeking the perfectly just” (Sen, 2009, p. 21). A number of the research participants, particularly those in older age groups, saw the opportunity to attend university online as a way to overcome past barriers to participation. Ayla was previously accepted into university but “finances sent me back to work”. Similarly, Amanda commenced a degree but “…didn’t cope so well. I have mental health issues”. Lena, who lives in a remote area, stated: “I’ve always wanted to do a...degree, ever since I was young, so it’s something that’s been in the back of my mind for a long time. But my circumstances never allowed for me to do that”. Marginson (2011a) asserts that “integral to the politics of equity is the need to build effective agency in people from groups formerly excluded or under-represented” (p. 30). The opportunity to build agency through online access to university study allows individuals from these groups to be “empowered and resources” (p. 30) and freed from a prior sense of educational and personal failure. As Joanna shared, “My previous experience [in education] served to silence me...Now...the voice in my head began to be more positive than negative”. After dropping out of a TAFE course, Daniel “...went into this course expecting to fail. I didn’t believe that I could do it” but subsequently achieved high marks in the unit, allowing him to rethink his abilities: “If I can complete this unit, why can’t I complete every other unit in this degree?”.

A capability approach to education and social justice has a focus on the substantive opportunities that students are able to develop (Gale & Molla, 2015). As Sen (2009) notes “the concept of capability is ... closely linked with the opportunity aspect of freedom [and] ... respects our being free to determine what we want, what we value and ultimately what we decide to choose” (p. 232). The research participants valued being able to access and engage with the university learning community partly for the freedom it gave them to be something ‘other’ to the constrained roles of their daily lives. Louise is a carer for members of her family, all of whom have health issues which require significant amounts of her attention, support and time. For her, online study provides relief: “I love studying so much - I’m hoping that it will become an anchor in my life - something I can cling to”. For Melissa, studying at university proved “I’m OK. I’m part of this world. I’m not a housewife that is dated and not in touch with technology”. Sen (2009) describes how people “cherish their ability to reason, appraise, choose, participate and act” (p. 250). In a number of interviews, there was a sense of exhilaration as students felt their university experience activated and enhanced these abilities: “It’s opened a whole new world to me that I didn’t even know existed before I started studying” (Melissa); “I felt empowered...to search for knowledge competently. I no longer find reading academic texts frightening. I love them” (Louise). The capability perspective allows the intrinsic value of higher education to be seen along with its instrumental value (Gale & Molla, 2015). Central to this perspective is agency (Wilson-Strydom, 2015) which is “at the core of concepts of self” (Marginson, 2011a, p. 29). Through their studies, successful students experienced a positive change in their self-perceptions by discovering their own capacity to succeed. “I realised that I have more resilience than I gave myself credit for when I was younger” (Amanda). Successful students felt a new capability both in academic and societal terms, allowing a more confident participation and contribution within
wider society: “I feel now that I have an opinion, that I have something to say...” (Melissa); “I now see the world through my ‘educated’ lens” (Moira).

Participation in higher education is an opportunity which can promote students’ agency and self-determination (Marginson, 2011b). The emergence of these important educational capacities is strongly apparent in the findings discussed above, which are consistent in depicting a positive experience of personal transformation and empowerment for completing students. The majority of participating students described fundamental shifts in their self-concepts, with greater confidence and self-esteem as a result. In the case of the participants who were successful in completing the unit, it can be argued that their participation in online learning went significantly towards producing some measure of social justice in their lives. While students are eager to gain the tools to transform themselves into capable university students, there is still the sense that they are affirmed both in their own identities and for the diverse understandings they bring to their education (Gale, 2012). Joanna, for instance, felt “as though I were an equal, and that I was welcome and my input and my learning were important...that I had as much right to be there as anybody”. This valuable aspect of online learning becomes evident through a focus on their experiences beyond the point of entry as has been the case with this research.

Conclusion

Online learning plays an important and increasing role in contemporary higher education in Australia and elsewhere, with its capacity to enable participation of many who would otherwise be excluded. Both fairness and inclusion are concepts which are foregrounded in Australian government policies to widen and increase access to higher education, aiming to foster a more socially just society. This is a goal for higher education widely shared internationally (Jia & Ericson, 2017). As stated by Sen (2009), policies which aim to increase social justice must “be alive to both fairness in the processes involved and to the equity and efficiency of the substantive opportunities people can enjoy” (p. 296). An exclusive focus on fairness, as determined by the number of equity students represented at enrolment, limits the development of a deeper understanding of the wide benefits equity students can gain from university participation. The power of online higher education to transform the lives of students from under-represented and disadvantaged backgrounds in substantive and positive ways becomes clear when the focus shifts to their individual experiences. The inclusion model allows this shift. Study options offered through online learning create important avenues to increase participation and facilitate inclusion for a diverse range of students. They allow those prevented from attending campus not only the opportunity to study at university level but also to participate in learning communities that recognise and affirm them. The voices of the successful online students who participated in the case study of ATU100 reveal the high value they placed on these opportunities through which they experienced enhanced self-worth and expanded capabilities. On the other hand, it is clear from the high attrition rate in online units and from the comments of non-completing students in the case study that this positive experience is not shared by all who study online. While further research is needed to gain more understanding of non-completers’ views, it is important that the central place of online learning in fostering inclusion in higher education, and its potential to transform students’ lives, is widely recognised and valued in higher education policies.

Acknowledgements

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Appendix E  Approvals and Permissions

1. Conditional ethics approval from Murdoch University

2. Conditions satisfied from Murdoch University

3. Amendments conditional approval from Murdoch University

4. Amendments conditions satisfied from Murdoch University

5. Ethics renewal from Murdoch University
Dear Lindy,

Project No. 2014/151
Project Title The Challenges of Teaching and Learning on the Edge of Academe

Your application in support of the above project was reviewed by the Education Expedited Sub-Committee of Murdoch University Human Research Ethics Committee.

Decision of Education Sub-Committee:

APPROVED – subject to the following CONDITIONS:

a) The application needs to have the School Dean’s signature.

b) Refer to the Consent Form, Involvement in Project. Include a statement that the participant agrees to be audio and/or video recorded.

You are not authorised to commence data collection until all conditions listed have been addressed to the satisfaction of the Human Research Ethics Committee. Your response to the conditions should be forwarded in writing to the Research Ethics and Integrity Office. Once the Committee is satisfied that the conditions have been met, you will be issued with a formal approval.

Please quote your ethics project number in all correspondence.

Kind Regards,

Dr. Erich von Dietze
Manager
Research Ethics and Integrity

cc: Dr Susan Ledger and Andrea Dodo-Balu
School of Education – Lindy Norris
2.

Wednesday, 03 September 2014

Dr Lindy Norris
School of Education
Murdoch University

Dear Lindy,

**Project No.** 2014/151
**Project Title** The Challenges of Teaching and Learning on the Edge of Academe

Thank you for addressing the conditions placed on the above application to the Murdoch University Human Research Ethics Committee. On behalf of the Committee, I am pleased to advise the application now has:

**OUTRIGHT APPROVAL**

Approval is granted on the understanding that research will be conducted according the standards of the *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (2007)*, the *Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research (2007)* and Murdoch University policies at all times. You must also abide by the Human Research Ethics Committee’s standard conditions of approval (see attached). All reporting forms are available on the Research Ethics and Integrity web-site.

I wish you every success for your research.

Please quote your ethics project number in all correspondence.

Kind Regards,

Dr. Erich von Dietze
Manager
Research Ethics and Integrity

cc: Dr Susan Ledger; Andrea Dodo-Balu
Monday, 30 January 2017

Dr Dorit Maor
School of Education
Murdoch University

Dear Dorit,

Project No. 2014/151
Project Title The Challenges of Teaching and Learning on the Edge of Academe

AMENDMENT:
1. Change of Chief Investigator to Dr Dorit Maor and addition of Dr Rebecca Saunders as Co-Investigator
2. Use of information from the NCSEHE survey
3. Use of unit evaluation survey
4. Permission to contact/interview students from more than one study period
5. Change of data storage details and location
6. Use of reflective journals from interviewed students

Your application for an amendment to the above project, received on 17/1/2017 was reviewed by the Murdoch University Human Research Ethics Committee and was:

Points 1-5: APPROVED

Ensure documentation provided to participants includes updated supervisor details.

Point 6: Use of reflective journals – NOT YET APPROVED – subject to the following conditions:

a) Provide justification for the use of the reflective journals. What will they add to the project that has not already been obtained from interviews?

Approval is granted on the understanding that research will be conducted according the standards of the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (2007), the Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research (2007) and Murdoch University policies at all times. You must also abide by the Human Research Ethics Committee’s standard conditions of approval. All reporting forms are available on the Research Ethics and Integrity web-site.

I wish you every success for your research.

Please quote your ethics project number in all correspondence.
Monday, 06 February 2017

Dr Dorit Maor
School of Education
Murdoch University

Dear Dorit,

Project No. 2014/151
Project Title The Challenges of Teaching and Learning on the Edge of Academe

AMENDMENT: Use of reflective journals

Your application for an amendment to the above project, received on 31/1/2017 was reviewed by the Murdoch University Human Research Ethics Committee and was:

APPROVED

Approval is granted on the understanding that research will be conducted according the standards of the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (2007), the Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research (2007) and Murdoch University policies at all times. You must also abide by the Human Research Ethics Committee's standard conditions of approval. All reporting forms are available on the Research Ethics and Integrity web-site.

I wish you every success for your research.

Kind Regards,

Dr. Erich von Dietze
Manager
Research Ethics and Integrity

cc: Dr Susan Ledger, Dr Rebecca Saunders and Andrea Dodo-Balu
Dear Dorit,

On behalf of the Murdoch University Human Research Ethics Committee, I certify that this project is renewed until **31 October 2017**, subject to any conditions listed below. This approval is effective ONLY with respect to the project as described in the original application and any subsequent amendments that have received approval.

As a condition of the approval of your human research ethics application you are required to report immediately anything, which might affect ethical acceptance of your project's protocols, including:

- Adverse effects on subjects
- Proposed changes in the protocols
- Unforeseen events that might affect continued ethical acceptability of the project.

Kind Regards,

Dr. Erich von Dietze  
Manager  
Research Ethics and Integrity

cc: Dr Susan Ledger, Dr Rebecca Saunders; Andrea Dodo-Balu