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EQUAL OR EQUITABLE? THE ROLE OF FLEXIBILITY WITHIN ONLINE EDUCATION

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Abstract

Online study is generally associated with the terms *flexible* and *flexibility*. Many students choose to study online specifically for the flexibility that is offered, hoping they can combine their studies with multiple other responsibilities in their lives. For students living in regional and rural areas, such flexibility can be even more important, given the additional difficulties they face in accessing campus facilities. While a flexible learning environment has the potential to contribute positively towards equity in higher education, this equity can be compromised when university policies and processes that have been designed for on-campus students are applied equally to online students. This paper examines the experiences of a group of regional and rural Education students who have chosen to study online, to a large extent because of online learning's promised flexibility. Their experiences demonstrate that *equal* treatment may in fact undermine flexibility and result in an *inequitable* student experience.

Keywords: assessment policies; equity in higher education; flexible delivery; online initial teacher education; online education; regional, rural and remote students, mature-age students.

Introduction

With ever-increasing numbers of Australian higher education students choosing to study as external, online students (Department of Education and Training, 2017a), it is becoming increasingly clear that the online student cohort is significantly different from the traditional on-campus cohort, containing many more “*who are older with responsibilities of family and work*” (Stone, O’Shea, May, Delahunty, & Partington, 2016, p. 163), plus a higher proportion of those who are first in their families to undertake higher education (Stone & O’Shea, 2019). Multiple studies have highlighted that the majority of online students are mature-age, in paid employment and/or with caring responsibilities towards children and perhaps other family members such as ageing parents (Hewson, 2018; Michael, 2012; O’Shea, Stone, & Delahunty, 2015; Ragusa & Crampton, 2018; Signor & Moore, 2014). The online cohort also contains higher proportions of students from regional, rural and remote areas, as well as from other Australian Government-identified equity categories such as low socio-economic status (SES) backgrounds, students with disability, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (Indigenous) students (Stone, 2017). In fact, these other equity categories are more highly represented within regional, rural and remote areas of Australia (Cardak et al., 2017; Halsey, 2017; James, 2001; James et al., 2008; National

Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education, 2017). As such, online education can be regarded as a particularly important equity measure for students from regional, rural and remote backgrounds, enabling more of these students to achieve university qualifications (Kent, 2016; Pollard, 2018; Smith, Trinidad, & Larkin, 2015).

The potential equity gains are however diminished by the lower student retention and progression rates compared with the performance of on-campus students. Various studies have shown that for external, online students, retention is poorer by at least 20 per cent (Greenland & Moore, 2014); 40 per cent fewer were found to have completed their degrees over a nine-year period (Department of Education and Training, 2017b); and withdrawal without a qualification is 2.5 times more likely (Department of Education and Training, 2017c). Many reasons for this have been expounded, such as technology challenges (Yoo & Huang, 2013), family, work and other caring commitments making it difficult to find enough time for study (Greenland & Moore, 2014; Ilgaz & Gülbahar, 2015), and poorly designed course materials and delivery (Devlin & McKay, 2016). Other researchers point to the importance of sufficient communication and contact with tutors and other students (Lambrinidis, 2014), including the “*presence*”, “*accessibility*” and “*responsiveness*” of the online teacher (Vincenzes & Drew, 2017, p. 13), to avoid online students experiencing a sense of isolation and “*aloneness*” (Resop-Reilly, Gallagher-Lepak, & Killion, 2012, p. 104).

More recently, a number of studies have stressed the importance of understanding and recognising the diversity of the online student cohort, contending that only through “*recognising, understanding and valuing this cohort*” (Stone & O’Shea, 2019, p. 66) can an equitable experience be achieved. If institutions expect this cohort to be largely the same as the on-campus cohort, there are likely to be “*gaps between expectations and delivery*” (Hewson, 2018, p. 10) on both sides. For example, Hewson (2018) proposes that “*a dominant [sic] student identity... is not realistic for online students*” (p. 11) who “*cannot prioritise their student identity over their work identity*” (p. 10) while Devlin and McKay (2018) highlight the “*subculture expectations and rules*” within universities that may not always be “*clear to online students*” (p. 161). Understanding the “*important fundamental differences between on-campus and online learners*” (Moore & Greenland, 2017, p. 57) is therefore a prerequisite for designing teaching, learning and support strategies that will effectively engage and support these students.

It is clear from the literature that these time-poor students are seeking flexibility when they choose to enrol in an external, online mode (Boling, Hough, Krinski, Saleem, & Stevens, 2012; Kuyini, 2011; Michael, 2012; O’Shea et al., 2015), with “*overwhelmingly, online studies [being] chosen for the flexibility that it offer[s], making it possible... to continue going to work, to care for children and meet other responsibilities*” (Stone et al., 2016, p. 155). However, while flexibility in online study may be promoted in theory, in practice it may be compromised by the application of inflexible university rules and regulations. For example, Moore and Greenland (2017) found that, amongst a cohort of 226 online students, from across ten Australian universities, “*failure to complete assessments due to unexpected and unavoidable employment commitments was the standout reason for dropping out*” (p. 52). Their research revealed “*inconsistent and vague policies for granting employment-related assessment extensions and concessions*” and “*a lack of flexibility in relation to accommodating student employment challenges*” (p. 58).

It has been suggested that, despite the prevalence of such terms as *flexible* and *flexibility* in the marketing of online courses, there is a lack of clarity within universities around the meaning and practical application of these terms. In an analysis of university terminology used to describe online courses, Todhunter (2013) found that “*rarely does the level of flexibility extend beyond the means by which students interact with staff, learning resources and fellow students*” (p. 240). While

students may anticipate fewer constraints in terms of other expectations, including time-frames, this may in fact be “*inconsistent with actual offerings*” (Todhunter, 2013, p. 247). It is through this lens of flexibility, and its application in practice for online students, that the findings from a research study, outlined below, are discussed.

Method

During the first half of 2018, nine students undertaking third-year studies within online four-year initial teaching education degrees, were recruited as participants in the research study. All were enrolled at an Australian regional university, which provided ethical approval for the research. These nine students were living in regional and rural locations across two Australian states.

The aim of the study was to seek an in-depth understanding of some of the factors contributing to online students’ engagement and persistence with their studies; this was sought through a longitudinal approach, following a small group of students through the duration of first semester 2018. It was decided that, for this initial study, it would be helpful to interview students who had already demonstrated engagement and persistence with their studies over some length of time. Therefore, purposeful sampling (Creswell, 2012) was used to recruit the participants. Second-year unit coordinators within the degree program were asked to identify online students from the previous year who had demonstrated strong engagement in their studies. For the purposes of this recruitment process, an engaged online learner was defined as someone who, consistently and reliably: participated in discussion boards and other learning activities; collaborated with other online students; and engaged with the lectures and readings.

Each nominated student was invited by email to participate in the study. Those interested were sent further information and asked to provide signed consent. They were told that they had been nominated, but not by whom. Similarly, the unit coordinators were not informed which students had agreed to participate. Pseudonyms were used in all documentation to preserve anonymity of the participants. A total of nine students became the participant group; all chose to continue throughout the length of the study, demonstrating a high level of commitment to being part of this project, despite the many other competing demands in their lives. Eight were female and one was male.

Using interpretive qualitative research methods (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011), eight interviews were conducted by audio or video calls with each student across the semester. The first interview occurred in the week prior to the start of semester; this was followed by six fortnightly interviews at weeks two, four, six, eight, ten and twelve. The eighth and final interview was conducted within a fortnight after the semester’s end.

Semi-structured questionnaires (Cresswell, 2012) were used for the interviews, with prompt questions to elicit conversations. This “*interview guide approach*” (Cohen et al., 2011, p. 413) helped to develop deep conversations in which participants narrated their experiences from their own perspective (Riessman, 2008). The prompt questions during the semester centred around the types of experiences that the students perceived as impacting upon their sense of confidence and engagement, while the first interview also asked about their motivations for online study and what had helped them to stay engaged so far. The final post-semester interview was essentially reflective, asking students to reflect on what had helped or hindered their confidence and engagement across the whole semester. The pre- and post-semester interviews lasted between 30 and 50 minutes, with around 20 to 30 minutes for the during-semester interviews. Each interview was conducted by the same interviewer throughout; this interviewer

was a member of the research team and was able to build significant rapport with each of the students through these regular conversations.

All participants had enrolled as mature-age students, were in paid employment and had family responsibilities of partners, children and/or other family members. This is consistent with the general profile of the external, online higher education student cohort in Australia, as discussed earlier in this paper. Five lived within the same Australian state as the university in which they were enrolled, while the other four lived in another Australian state. None lived in metropolitan areas; they were all living either in rural areas or in regional towns and cities. While the interviews did not ask them directly about their work, their family or other personal circumstances, information was volunteered spontaneously at different points during the interviews. Table 1 below provides a summary of these demographics:

Table 1: Demographic information volunteered by participants

Name (Pseudonym)	Where they live (Regional/rural)	Partnered	Children	Paid employment
Angela	Interstate	Yes	Adult children at university	Yes
Carol	Same state	Yes	2 primary school	Yes
Evan	Same state	Yes	2 pre-school	Yes
Fiona	Same state	Not disclosed	Not disclosed	Yes
Julie	Interstate	Yes	3 school-age	Yes
Linda	Same state	No	No	Yes
Margaret	Interstate	Yes	4 at university	Yes
Penny	Same state	Not disclosed	1 high school	Yes
Sonia	Interstate	Yes	No	Yes

Interviews were transcribed verbatim and the data analysed using a combination of NVivo (11) along with manual line-by-line analysis to identify and further investigate emerging themes. Consistent with Creswell’s (2012) steps for analysing and interpreting qualitative data, each interview transcript was carefully read through, notes were made, and phrases and quotes highlighted, in order to “catch the complexity” (Cohen et al., 2011, p. 266) of the students’ stories.

Findings

While a number of significant themes arose from the data, some of which have been discussed in a separate paper (Muir et al., 2019), this paper focusses particularly on the understandings and experiences of these students in relation to the degree of flexibility offered within their studies. Each participant mentioned at different times throughout the interviews that sufficient flexibility within their studies was essential for them. It helped them to manage their study load, remain engaged and persist, despite the many other commitments in their lives. This paper therefore explores this concept of flexibility – what it meant for these students and how they experienced it.

Flexibility to Fit Study In and Around Busy Lives

To begin with, what did flexibility mean to these students and how did they describe it? As Table 1 indicates, these were all mature-age students. They described deliberately choosing online study because they needed the flexibility that they believed had been promised. For these students, flexibility meant being able to study when and where they could fit it in around busy lives and other pressing responsibilities and commitments.

I choose to study online because I work... all shift work. I have a six- and eight-year-old child who were, obviously, two years younger when I started this degree, and I'm married to someone who also has a job, and he needs to be in a certain place for work, so I really didn't have any option but to study online. (Carol, Pre-Semester)

As expressed by Angela, “the whole point of being online is, I would have thought, for flexibility, and to then encompass a much broader range of learners in different circumstances” (Pre-Semester). It was disappointing, and potentially disengaging, when they experienced at times a lack of understanding or regard for their circumstances as online students. In the words of Julie, “We all have different circumstances and that's why we're studying online”. Julie described how in one of her units the tutor had told all students, including those online, that any contributions to the discussion forum posted after Wednesday each week would not be looked at by the tutor, as this was considered to be too late in the week to merit attention.

But if you haven't posted by Wednesday, then tough. Well I might not be able to get to mine [until] Saturday. So nothing gets... there's no comments, there's no nothing. It's more difficult when that happens. (Julie, Pre-Semester)

Penny had a similar experience, with one unit that “demands your posting by Friday morning at 10, or whatever it is”. In week four, she was interrupted by “children's trip to the doctors and things like that, so I just had to let that go”. As a result, “I'm not going to get feedback on that week's work, because I didn't get that done Friday morning. I was trying”. To Penny, this was an example of what she had referred to earlier, in week two, of her “pet hate”, exemplified by this particular tutor “telling us that, even though we're online, that he'll be treating us the same as the on-campus students and everything has to be done by Friday morning”. Penny expanded on her reasons for this being such a problem, not just for her but for many other online students:

We're being sold a product that is described as fully flexible: study when you want to. So to have a lecturer say to you, “Oh, but it's not convenient for me to come in on the following Monday and look at the week's work. I want to do it by Friday, so you will all do it by Friday.” So it's sort of like treating it as an office-hours gig when it's not, so if that content isn't available until nine a.m. on Monday morning, and say you're working, and you've got after-school sports and things like that, you're actually then forced to do really late nights; and I know so many students that just spend their entire weekend ... that's their study time. (Penny, Week 2)

Also mentioned as problematic for online students was compulsory attendance at synchronous activities:

We're doing a web conference tomorrow night, which is compulsory, at 7:30 to 9:00, which I thought, “Oh, if you had kids, if you were working...”. I thought that was a little bit, not a nice thing to do... I think a little bit limiting considering online students have such diversity. (Angela, Week 8)

Similarly, a study by Boling et al. (2012) in which students reported preferring online study “because of the flexibility and convenience it offered” nevertheless also found that “some instructors required students to participate in synchronous online classrooms” (p. 121).

So, despite marketing rhetoric about the flexibility of online study, these students experienced, in Penny's words, an “office-hours” approach to the ways in which some units were being

delivered. They found themselves facing the same expectations as those for on-campus students, bound by a number of inflexible rules and policies that did not fit with the after-hours nature of online study for mature-age, time-poor students. As Linda said, *“I think it goes against the notion of being a distance student, when they spout on about flexibility.”*

Flexibility to Manage Competing Priorities

All the participants were in paid work and had significant additional responsibilities, mostly related to caring for others. Margaret, in the post-semester interview, reflected that *“Life throws things at you and unfortunately life threw a lot at me this semester”*, having had to deal with a death in the family early in the semester, followed later by serious health concerns about one of her children. In the previous week 12 interview, Margaret had reflected, *“I’ve been in survival mode, to be honest with you”* due to concerns about her child which she *“absolutely, absolutely... definitely”* had to put first over anything else, as *“that was my priority”*.

Similarly, Penny experienced a great deal of concern and distraction from study over a child’s health. *“He’s got another sore throat. To antibiotic or to not antibiotic? And then he had [another] appointment”* (Week 4). Evan, by week six of the semester, was finding that trying to study with two small children, *“the eight month and the two and a half year old”*, was increasingly difficult, and had some regrets about taking on three units of study this semester. *“At times, I think it probably was a little bit too much.”* Evan expanded on how this impacted upon both his family and his studies.

Sometimes it’s tough on family life because you don’t try and prioritise study as number one. When we first had our first daughter, I was new to uni then, and I was like, “Oh hang on. I’ve got to go and do my assignment,” but, “Oh, you haven’t had sleep for the last 38 hours or 40 hours”. I’m thinking, “I’d better go and listen to this lecture quickly”. It’s one of those things where you’ve got to balance that out, because otherwise home life might not be home life very much longer. (Evan, Week 6)

Sonia managed a small business in a rural town with her husband. The demands of the business meant that her time was very limited. *“I focus on most of my work in the first three days or four days of the week. And then anything after that is just lucky if I get time”* (Week 4). In week six she reported *“my husband got sick, so I had to cover his workload... It was probably only three days, but those three days are usually when I’m doing the most work I can”*. As a result her studies had to take a back seat and two weeks later she was *“at the same spot as I was last time I spoke to you, in terms of assessments”* (Week 8).

For Julie, while her husband was away for work, she had been *“trying to get everybody everywhere by myself for two weeks”* as well as having *“two assignments due”* plus *“some health issues with one of my munchkins during the week last week”* (Week 10). Reflecting on this situation two weeks later, Julie commented, *“when stuff happens with family, well, that comes before uni”* (Week 12).

Fiona had extensive work commitments which impacted on her studies multiple times during the semester. *“I work three jobs, and all of them, at the end of the semester, just at the wrong time, had different challenges that they threw at me.”* She reflected in the post-semester interview how challenging it had been *“just generally fitting everything in around a busy life... and then add into it three assignments due within a week”*. She expressed relief that the semester had ended:

“another week and I don’t know that I could’ve sustained it. I think I would’ve come crashing down.”

Linda regularly travelled long distances to visit her elderly and unwell father to assist her mother with his care.

If my dad’s particularly unwell then I’ll feel a sense of wanting to pick up the slack for them. That’s hard when you live two and a half hours away and you’ve got commitments in [local area], but you’re still trying to do everything for your family, and maintain study, and maintain sanity. (Linda, Week 2)

Given the demands on the time and resources of these students, the need for flexibility to pace their studies and fit them around other commitments was pressing. At times it appeared that university policies, designed in the interests of equality for all students, meant a curtailing of this type of flexibility for online, distance students who depend upon this. In the words of Angela, speaking in week four, “I feel like we need a balance to still do things... it isn’t all about uni, especially at this age. It’s not all about uni. So the uni has to fit in with my life”.

Flexibility to Move Ahead or to Catch Up from Behind

Learning materials available in advance. As with the students in Hewson’s study (2018, p. 5), who “wanted all their learning materials to be available in advance”, several participants in this research mentioned many times across the semester’s interviews how important it was to be able to access their learning materials in advance, rather than week-by-week. For Angela, this was the essence of online learning – the flexibility to work ahead at one’s own pace to fit study around other time-consuming commitments.

And that’s the whole positive of being online, where people are interstate, people on night shifts, people who can’t attend school in standard hours that school is offered. It has to be flexible, ‘cause the people that do night shifts and want to come back, or people that dropped their kids off at school and want to get straight to work at 9 o’clock; and if they wait for 4 o’clock for a lecture to be put up, it’s such a waste. (Angela, Pre-Semester)

Similarly, for Penny, having content available ahead of time helped to make online study a more flexible experience.

I think it does add to the flexibility. So, if you know you’ve got a lot of things on, say, in week five, you can maybe put in a few extra hours in week four to listen to those lectures. Or, get some postings up early and come back and read them later the following week. (Penny, Week 4)

However, by week four, Angela was experiencing a growing sense of frustration about content not being available when she had the time to work on it.

I’m sort of sitting here this afternoon and I know I’ve got a few hours before everyone starts walking in the door so I could easily really make an inroad in that subject, but there’s almost no point because the quiz for this week is coming out Saturday, so there’s no point, doing information for next week, it won’t come out ‘til next Saturday. So I feel a bit annoyed by that because I can’t ... I just feel like I’m not being productive with my time. (Angela, Week 4)

In week 10, Fiona talked about “waiting desperately for the question and answer for that particular component to come up, so it means you can’t get a start on it”, and the importance to her of being able to “engage when I had the time”. In units where materials were available ahead of time, she could make more productive use of any free time that became available in her busy schedule.

I’ve got the weekend free... so I went through all of the units to see what was available. And that one I already knew had everything available. So that’s the assessment task that I’m doing this weekend... that I’m working on this weekend. Because I can. If that wasn’t there, then life’s busy and I work 60 or 70 hours a week, and I don’t know when they would get done. (Fiona, Week 10)

Hewson (2018, p. 6) makes the point that, where lecturers and tutors are responsible for teaching a mix of face-to-face and online students, “this creates a challenge”. It can be time-consuming and difficult to design and deliver what is essentially a different course for the online students, in which learning materials are pre-designed, uploaded in advance, and appropriately monitored, to allow students to work through them at their own pace. Yet, when words such as *flexible* and *work at your own pace* are used to market online courses, this is understandably what many students feel they are being promised. Angela voiced the impact on online students’ learning patterns when all students are expected to work at the same pace:

I find that a little bit disconcerting and I think I have mentioned to the lecturer about releasing them [weekly online quizzes] and she said it wasn’t possible. I think obviously she wants them done at a certain time, and she wants her whole cohort to do them, but for my style of learning it just doesn’t work for me, unfortunately. (Angela, Week 4)

Extensions of time for assessment tasks. Another area in which students felt the need for more flexibility was extensions of time for assessment tasks, when circumstances meant that they were temporarily behind schedule. As outlined earlier, these students were all in the third year of their four-year degree, and had been nominated as potential participants because they were demonstrating high levels of engagement with their studies. Many of them expressed frustration at the difficulties involved in seeking even a short extension of time, on rare occasions, due to quite rigid rules being applied.

Evan, with two small children and working full-time, explained in some depth how rules around extensions impacted on him.

They said, “Oh look. We can’t really give you an extension this week unless you get a stat dec [statutory declaration]. It’s not a properly valid excuse.” Then, I have to go and make sure someone’s available for me to get them to sign it, send it off, wait for the response and then, all of a sudden, it’s the next day. Then, if you haven’t got on top of it, I mean most of the time, it’s last minute. Then, you can only get the request, you don’t know if you’re going to get the extension. Yeah. It’s one of those things where ideally it would be nice to say, “Look, give me a call on this number and we’ll have a chat and see where we’re at.” (Evan, Week 6)

What was seen as a valid reason for extensions was interesting in itself. In Evan’s case, his reason for seeking an extension was that his wife was exhausted and he needed to give her a break from looking after the children. Given the demands on Evan’s time, it is unsurprising that he preferred to approach his teacher personally to outline his situation, and be considered for a short extension based on his circumstances, instead of following a time-consuming bureaucratic

process in the interests of 'equal' treatment for all students. As Bissonette (2017, p. 19) found, "students typically choose to study online because they juggle multiple responsibilities... and classroom participation and assignment completion are often the first expectations to get set aside when other responsibilities grow"; however, if tutors and lecturers encourage students to approach them to discuss difficulties, it is more likely that students will "seek out help when they need it" (Bissonette, 2017, p. 19).

It is what it is, but it would also be nice to say, "Oh look. I got two young kids. One's eight months and they've been sick. I haven't been able to study tonight because my wife's been awake since three o'clock this morning. Then, I've had to help out to make sure ..." That's the only thing that I find a little bit hard to deal with. For me, I get home at 8:30 at night, then I start studying and if I finish at one o'clock, good. (Evan, Week 6)

Consistent with the "lack of consideration given to employment" found by Moore and Greenland (2017, p. 58), employment-related reasons were not perceived as valid for seeking extensions. Linda reported that, "when I started my degree, they told us that things like work would never be acceptable" (Week 6). Julie's experience was, "I actually had one of my lecturers go, well I don't give extensions for job reasons" (Pre-Semester). Julie had also found that the definition of "work reasons" encompassed the volunteer work she did with emergency services within her small and quite isolated rural community.

I spent nine days out of the 14 on [emergency services] and doing whatever else, and asked for an extension and was told in no uncertain terms that, "We don't give extensions for work reasons". My work that I'm doing with [emergency services] is, it's not work, it's volunteer, but you don't have a choice as to whether you decide whether you're going to get [called out] today or not. (Julie, Week 12)

However, it also appeared that the degree of flexibility around the application of such rules and policies depended a great deal on the individual lecturer or tutor. In Linda's experience:

I think it does depend on the lecturer, because I did have one lecturer in my first year, I think, where everything went pear-shaped with my mum and dad's [farm] and they had to leave in the middle... to go to [state capital city] because they were unwell. I literally just rang the lecturer and I was like "I've got no documentation but this is what's happening. I can get you documentation." He's like "No, no, no. You don't need to do that. Just do what you need to do and then do your assignment", so some are really good and some are a lot harder. (Linda, Week 6)

Sonia's experience was also more positive:

And I asked him about ... I said, "I'm not going to get it done on this deadline. I'm going to have to hand it in tomorrow or tonight." And he said... "No, don't worry, there's no penalty." He was very understanding.

Evan reflected on an experience in his previous year of study, in which his tutor was more flexible about an extension, due to the fact that this tutor was also studying and had children, and could therefore empathise. "I had a tutor who was my lecturer last year. As soon as I sent her a message, she's like, 'Yeah. That's fine'. When I spoke to her on the phone, I think, it's just like, 'Oh I have kids, blah blah blah, and I study'". (Evan, Week 6)

In a subsequent interview, Evan elaborated on the inconsistency he had been experiencing.

It was almost like you were trying to explain that the dog had eaten your homework or something like that, because it was almost like there wasn't that belief ... which kind of was a bit upsetting; because then, as soon as I'd mentioned it to another, because I had two assignments due, very similar sort of time, so I just mentioned it to another lecturer, and their response was a total reversal of that. You know, they were like "Oh is there anything we can do to help. Let me know." Whereas this other one was like, "Well, no". (Evan, Week 8)

Impact on student engagement. Being met by an inflexible approach and a perceived lack of understanding for their situations impacted negatively upon the students' sense of engagement and motivation. In Evan's words, "you sort of lose the motivation a bit. You lose that, 'Ah, I'm going really well here', and then it's almost like, 'What am I doing?'" Julie's conclusion was:

I'm not special. Well, to me I am, but to them I'm not. I'm just a person. I'm just a number really, because they don't know me and that's part of the stuff with online I suppose. I'm not a person, I'm just a number. (Julie, Pre-Semester)

Linda's comments echoed this view of being "just a number", reflecting her sense of being disadvantaged, as an online student, when it came to needing help and support.

So often we are treated as just a number and you really can't grasp how severe or desperate a situation is online, whereas if the student were to see you face-to-face and ask for the same thing, oftentimes the answer would be different as there are many different cues to pick up on. (Linda, Week 10)

By the end of the semester, her engagement and motivation had been severely impacted: "And so then I kind of go, 'Oh, well you guys are so inflexible', and I lose respect for them, and then I get disengaged, and it's this vicious cycle and my attitude sucks even more" (Linda, Week 12).

An understanding and flexible approach had the opposite effect, as Angela described: "when the uni's quite flexible with me, it makes it very, very doable, thank goodness. Very doable" (Week 4). Julie reported her experience when she needed an extra couple of days for an assessment at short notice:

I basically sent a note to [the lecturer] and just went, "Look, I'm drowning here. Barely keeping my head above water at this point, because of all this stuff that's going on." He went, "Just write me the paperwork, send me a stat dec". I said, "I can't get it signed." I said, "There's no one in town. I live in a small country town." He said, "Don't care [about it being signed]. Just fill it out, send it to me," he said, "I'll grant you the extension". (Julie, Week 8)

The fact that this lecturer was prepared to bend the rules and allow an unsigned statutory declaration to be submitted was, for Julie, "fantastic, just absolutely fantastic; couldn't have asked for any more help there, because he was really, really understanding". However, if lecturers must break or bend the rules to provide necessary support, perhaps "a return to increasing academic freedom or 'flexibility' within learning design and delivery" (Ragusa & Crampton, 2018, p. 15) is needed.

Discussion

The demographic characteristics of the participants in this study are consistent with the broader online cohort, which overwhelmingly consists of students who are not traditional school-leavers. As with these participants, online students are generally older, returning to study alongside significant other responsibilities, including paid employment and family commitments. Most have children and some are also caring for elderly parents. Consistent with other research, the experiences of the participants in this study have shown that their life responsibilities inevitably impact upon their ability to prioritise study. Family and work must come first for these students (Hewson, 2018) and study has to fit around these primary responsibilities. The high attrition rate amongst online learners compared with face-to-face learners reflects this, with various studies of online attrition revealing that personal, family and work reasons are most commonly cited in the decision to leave (Moore & Greenland, 2017). Additionally, the students in this study were all living at a considerable geographic distance from their university, in regional and rural locations across two different Australian states, adding to their isolation from both campus and metropolitan facilities.

Equality or Equity?

There is a strong argument that the circumstances and demographic profile of online students need to be taken into consideration in the application of university policies and practices (Hewson, 2018; Ragusa & Crampton, 2018). As Moore and Greenland (2017, p. 52) point out, *“many online educators are using policies and protocols that are designed for traditional on-campus students without adequate adaptation for the online learner”*. The equal application of such policies and protocols across online student cohorts may not in fact produce an equitable outcome, given the differences and particular needs of these learners. Equality is about ensuring that all receive the same *treatment*, whereas equity is about ensuring equal *outcomes* for all. Takeuchi, Dearing, Bartholomew, and McRoy (2018, p. 14) tell us that *“the concept [of equality] has been critiqued for its inability to convey the reality that not all people begin at the same starting point”*; while equity endeavours to *“focus on outcomes”* and, metaphorically, *“supports solutions that advance the runner who is structurally disadvantaged by a poor starting position”*.

Certainly, the experience of mature-age online students (when and how they can find the time to study, plus the “virtual” nature of their interaction with learning materials, teachers and other students) is not equal to that of traditional on-campus students. Results from longitudinal research (Hewson, 2018, p. 4) with online students at a large university in the United Kingdom (UK) highlight the importance of context – of recognising that online students are undertaking study *“in the context of already challenging work/life balances”*. This UK research found that online students, by necessity, *“prioritised family first, work second and study third”*; there tended to be *“a lack of structure”* in their study habits, mainly due to *“childcare and extra-curricular activities”*, with most studying *“in their homes”* while multi-tasking, such as by listening to *“course-related audio recordings over their tablet or phone while cooking”*. As such, the online student cohort is not “equal to” the on-campus cohort, nor, most importantly, is it “less than”. As previous studies have demonstrated, the challenges online students face may be different from those of traditional on-campus students, but these mature students bring with them their own life experience, strengths and skills (Devlin & McKay, 2018; Signor & Moore, 2014); they deserve an equitable experience rather than one that is designed primarily with on-campus, school-leaver students in mind.

Flexibility as an Equity Measure

Flexibility within online studies is both advertised by universities, in describing and marketing online courses, and highly valued by prospective online students. The promise of flexibility is a significant influence in their decision-making about whether to enrol. However, in many cases, university policies and processes have not yet been adapted to allow for greater flexibility within online courses, and instead are applied universally. Without sufficient flexibility, the position of online students can be rendered inequitable. Findings from this study have shown that individual lecturers and tutors are, at times, prepared to deviate unofficially from set policies to allow more individual flexibility, such as granting a short assessment extension without the usual required paperwork. In the absence of policies and processes that are more equitable for online delivery, academic staff are placed in the difficult position of choosing between flouting university policy by offering a more flexible approach, or holding the official line and risking students being disadvantaged. Participants in this study voiced the need for greater flexibility to move ahead with their studies, progressing through course materials at their own pace to maximise their time; yet the design and delivery of their courses did not often allow for this. With content mostly designed for delivery to face-to-face students, available on a week-by-week basis, online students were required to work at the same pace, which did not suit lives full of competing and higher priority commitments, in which time for study had to be carefully hoarded and closely managed. They were also expected to meet the same university administrative requirements as for on-campus students, such as documentation for assessment extensions, despite living in regional and rural locations where it was more difficult to access the necessary services.

Next Steps

Inevitably there are limitations with this study. Firstly, it was a small study, looking at a cohort of only nine students and, secondly, all these students had demonstrated a high level of engagement and success within their studies over the previous two years of their course. Nevertheless, the in-depth, qualitative and longitudinal approach generated a wealth of rich data from its 72 interviews. The findings demonstrate consistency with other studies of the online student experience, therefore providing useful insights. Further research to expand on these insights, with a larger cohort and a greater diversity of students in terms of success and experience, is now needed. A larger study is being planned by the authors of this paper, aiming to add significantly to understandings about the importance of flexibility within online learning, particularly for regional and rural students. Although not a focus of this research project, it is likely that many on-campus students may be experiencing similar concerns about flexibility, particularly given the increasing diversity of the on-campus student population. Investigating the extent to which on-campus students' experiences of flexibility affect equity is clearly of ongoing relevance also.

Conclusion

These findings indicate that flexibility has an important role to play in enhancing equity in online education. Equal treatment for all students, no matter their different circumstances, is not likely to be equitable. Online students are seeking greater flexibility, not only in terms of when and where they engage with the learning content, teachers and other students, but also in terms of the actual design and delivery of online courses, and in student policies and processes. Examples include more flexible access to learning materials, enabling students to effectively plan and maximise limited time, by working ahead or catching up as necessary; also university policies that allow greater flexibility for teachers and coordinators in their responses to requests for assessment extensions or deferrals. The challenge for all universities which teach a mix of online

and on-campus students is how to ensure that the societal inequities and life circumstances, including location, which make it difficult for so many students to attend university face-to-face, do not remain barriers to equity for these students when they study online. The evidence is clear that the availability of online study is a significant equity measure in widening access to higher education in Australia (Stone, 2017). For equity to be similarly improved in online students' continuing participation and success, universities need to reconsider the idea of *equal* treatment for all students, and move instead towards a more flexible, differentiated and *equitable* approach.

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