Supporting and engaging students in an online environment

Looking at the evidence

Cathy Stone

TEC Webinar

July 2020

Dr Cathy Stone, Independent Consultant & Researcher

Prior to COVID-19, online students were more likely than those on-campus to be:

- Older

- Female

- First in their families/amongst their friends, to go to university

- Working in part-time or full-time employment

- Studying part-time

- From one or more equity categories (low SES; regional/remote; Indigenous; disability)

- Time-poor, with multiple other commitments e.g. home/work/family

- From an Australian Govt-identified HE equity group – particularly low SES

Before - about 25% of the student cohort. Now - potentially ALL students, including those above. A very diverse cohort.

Sources: *Australian Government Department of Education; Stone et al., 2016; Stone, 2017; Stone et al., 2019*

Online has traditionally provided *opportunity* for those historically underrepresented in HE
(e.g. older, FiF, low SES, regional, Indigenous, with disability)

➤ And, it's very strange for me because... during the day, I'm just a mother and I'm just a cleaning lady, so... in the world of the work chain, I'm down the bottom... and then here I am, at night, studying psychology. So, I have a lot of moments where I'm like "Wow, hey, no-one would pick that". *(Female online student, aged 36)*

...but also *challenges*

➤ In Australia, pre-COVID-19, distance students **2.5 times** more likely than on-campus students to withdraw without a qualification *(Australian HE Standards Panel (HESP) Discussion Paper, 2017)*

We need to make it work for ALL students

Sources: *Stone et al., 2016; Australian Department of Education, 2017*

Hearing from online students – what do they most appreciate?

Engagement & sense of connection with their online lecturer/tutor:

➡ if the tutor's very active and engaging with students, generally the students are more willing to engage with each other. (*Male online student, aged 41*)

Well designed materials:

➡ what works in person is not the same as online… I thought it would be more tailor-made for it than what it is. *(Female online student, aged 50)*

Relevant and timely support:

➡ I got an email telling me that they were here to help, give us a call if you ever want a chat, then I thought I'm going to call these guys. It was really helpful. I had a chat to a woman over the phone who was really great. *(Female online student, aged 30)*

Flexibility:

➡ you're working, and you've got after-school sports and things like that, you're forced to do really late nights; so many students spend their entire weekend [on] study time. *(Female online student, aged 40+)*

Sources: *O'Shea et al., 2015; Stone et al., 2016; Stone et al., 2019*

How can institutions engage and support online students most effectively?

Key findings from Research with 15 Australian universities & Open University UK
(development of National Guidelines for Improving Student Outcomes in Online Learning)

► Know who the students are: their diversity, needs & strengths, tailoring teaching and support interventions accordingly (flexible, inclusive, accessible)

> *people who are struggling with other things, so, actually picking up the phone and saying you're having trouble with your studying is pretty low on the old agenda. (Lecturer)*

► Recognise online education as core business: not an after-thought; ensuring quality & consistency of delivery; timely and embedded support

> *It's not secondary education, and, you know, until the whole university thinks like that and it's core business, then we're always pushing things. (Program Coordinator)*

► Intervene early: provide early personal contact to inform, reduce anxiety; orientation aimed at off-campus students, both online & in-person; embedded academic support in beginning units/courses

► Take a collaborative approach: academic & professional staff working together to achieve a coordinated, institution-wide support/engagement strategy

Source: *Stone, 2017*

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➤ Provide strong 'teacher-presence': regular feedback & communication; building sense of community amongst students as a group

➤ Design for online: interactive, engaging, varied, encouraging class discussion, not overly 'high-tech', easy to navigate

  allowing opportunities for students to engage with the content online; teacher-presence in the blogs and discussion boards (Online Curriculum Manager)

➤ Implement coordinated intervention strategies: outreach informed by data

  We reach out to students when we think they may be sort of falling by the wayside,   having some difficulties. (Student Services Manager)

➤ Offer appropriate academic & personal support services: easy to access remotely; extended hours; well promoted to both students & staff; embedded in curriculum

  so rather than it's over here, outside of the discipline base, it's actually embedded. (Teaching & Learning Manager)
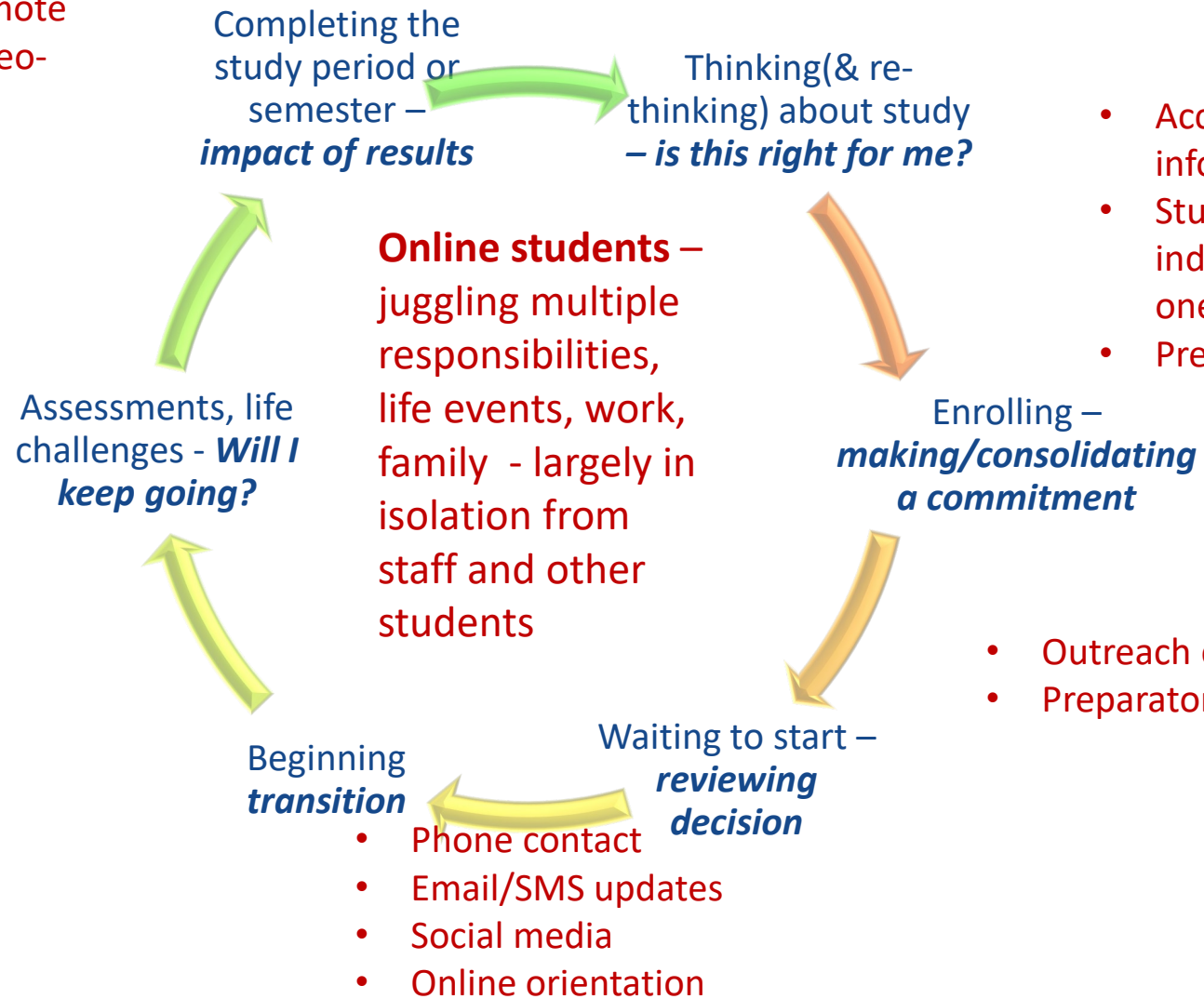
Source: *Stone, 2017*

Bringing it all together – comprehensive model of engagement & support

Personal support & equity services
Offered out-of-hours and via remote access (e.g. phone, live chat, video-conferencing)

Teaching & Learning support
Strong teacher-presence
Embedded support (e.g. learning support embedded in early units within curriculum)
Online tutorial/learning support

Intervention strategy
"Checking in"
Outreach calls
Inbound calls
Emails / SMS
Live chat
Webinars
Peer mentoring

Completing the study period or semester – *impact of results*

Thinking(& re-thinking) about study – *is this right for me?*

Online students – juggling multiple responsibilities, life events, work, family - largely in isolation from staff and other students

Assessments, life challenges - *Will I keep going?*

Enrolling – *making/consolidating a commitment*

- Accurate and timely information
- Student Advisors take an individual approach – not one-size-fits-all
- Preparatory courses

- Outreach contact
- Preparatory courses

Beginning *transition*

Waiting to start – *reviewing decision*

- Phone contact
- Email/SMS updates
- Social media
- Online orientation

*Based on *Student Engagement Cycle* – model developed by Stone, Hewitt & Morelli, 2013

Questions, discussion, further thoughts...

Full Report & National Guidelines available at:

www.ncsehe.edu.au

Or email me at:

cathy.stone@newcastle.edu.au

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