

FIRST YEAR CORE COURSE LEADERS' COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE TOOLKIT

FIRST YEAR COURSE LEADERS TOOLKIT ITEM

Flexible learning

THE USQ
CoPs PROJECT

Faculty of Arts CoP
and
Faculty of Business CoP

<http://www.usq.edu.au/cops>

USQ UNIVERSITY OF
SOUTHERN QUEENSLAND

Topic: Flexible learning

Thinking about flexible learning

What is the intended outcome?

To meet different student needs both in terms of modes of engagement with studies, and in terms of learning preferences and requirements through flexible learning.

What is the established practice?

Many students still have only limited access to course materials and learning support outside of the face-to-face context. Most students have only limited choices in relation to course content and modes of assessment.

What are the advantages for both teachers and students in considering flexible learning?

Flexible modes of delivery can deliver greater equity to external students and provide all students with greater opportunities to engage with course materials in a mode and timeframe that suits their schedule. Flexible learning options in relation to course content and assessment allows universities to address the needs of a diverse, multi-disciplinary cohort without undermining intended learning outcomes. Giving students some element of choice also ideally builds independent life-long learning capabilities.

Background

The changing context of higher education has placed an increasing emphasis on flexibility. This concept is sometimes understood as flexible delivery, which involves offering students different modes of study, which might include using different modes of delivery for course materials, including web-based, CDs, DVDs and so on. However, flexibility can also refer to curriculum design that offers students some element of choice, either in course content or course assessment. This last interpretation of flexibility is particularly appropriate where large courses service diverse cohorts of students with different disciplinary backgrounds.

Challenge

There are a few challenges for first year convenors in introducing principles of flexible delivery and practice into their teaching: the first, is to maintain appropriate levels of support for first year students; the second is to provide flexible learning in ways that are equitable – flexible modes of delivery can often result in problems of access for some students; the third is to provide flexibility in course content and assessment without jeopardising intended learning outcomes, including important skills such as time management.

Academic solutions for maximum impact

At USQ flexible modes of delivery are a priority due to our large external student cohort. Generally, this involves placing course lectures and other materials either on the course website, on a CD or DVD.

Some first year convenors include online [learning support materials](#) to help students do assessment items, including slide shows, activities, videos, exemplars and other support materials. Items can be sent to students on a CD or loaded onto the course website. Copying items onto a CD provides greater equity of access for students with only basic or limited connections to the internet. Others provide flexible student access to [lectures](#) themselves through the use of Breeze or video-based lecture presentations.

Others provide flexibility of content and assessment, allowing students to make some choices about the mode, focus or timing of their assessment pieces. This is appropriate for courses that teach students from different disciplines, with slightly different learning preferences and requirements. However, different choices must still offer students the opportunity to achieve stated course learning outcomes, including independent learning skills such as time management.

Key points for flexible learning

- Flexible learning recognises the reality of students' busy schedules and provides multiple delivery modes, which allow students the greatest possible window of access to course materials
- Flexible learning recognises that different students have different learning preferences and requirements. Where they do not conflict with stated course learning outcomes, students can be offered choices between different modes of assessment and different content focus
- Flexible learning ideally builds students' independent, life-long learning capabilities rather than undermining them.

Final Word

Students increasingly balance their studies with longer hours of work and other commitments. First year convenors recognise that as a distance provider, this is particularly true of part-time and mature age students at USQ. However, convenors also balance flexible learning initiatives with issues such as providing adequate levels of support for first year students, and considerations of alignment with course learning outcomes.