

## **Alternate delivery modes for international students**

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As a consequence of the COVID -19 pandemic there has been an involuntary shift to online learning. In turn this has also highlighted and facilitated a range of other alternate mode delivery mechanisms for international students. Sometimes referred to as flexible modes of delivery and other time alternate modes of delivery. The traditional face to face mode has been overtaken (certainly for a period of time) with a range of alternative arrangements that cater for lock downs and community restrictions.

Prior to the pandemic international education (onshore in Australia) was in face to face mode with strict regulations around the percentage of classes allowed to be completed on line by international students; the importance of attendance at face to face classes; the extent of employment hours permitted on a student visa; and 50% progression rates in order to maintain the student visa. Much of this dictated by the ESOS Act 2000 and the supporting National Code.<sup>1</sup> Then, of course, everything changed! In truth there has been a slow and determined movement in the regulations over a period of time. Matters such as attendance have been downplayed for a number of years for example.

The so-called alternate (flexible) modes of delivery – Blended Learning (bLearning)<sup>2</sup>, Online Learning (eLearning)<sup>3</sup> and Hybrid Learning (hLearning)<sup>4</sup> were viewed as domestic products with little if any application for international students studying in Australia. This too is no longer the case! The rapid shift to online learning that occurred created a new precedent that is likely to stay with us for some time. The prediction is that even on a turn to face to face learning in the years ahead the percentage of study permitted on line for international students will grow to 50% of the load. This represents a significant shift in thinking.

Tertiary Institutions were required to move rapidly into eLearning - as a matter of survival. Some of the better prepared organisations (and many had been dabbling in alternate/flexible options for some time) managed to deviate even further and utilise the other two modes with varying degrees of success. Sector reports suggest the more flexible inclined have fared best in the so called international student crisis. There are a number of reasons for this. As the Australian Government regulations loosed on the number of paid hours that international students can work in country – from 40 hours per fortnight to unlimited – the demand, of course, for flexibility has grown significantly.

### **The perils of enforced eLearning**

The sudden switch to online (eLearning) caused a considerable level of distress for many institutions and in particular academic staff. For many this was the 'end of the world' as they knew it. Understandably, for staff who had been teaching international students for many years

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<sup>1</sup> <https://internationaleducation.gov.au/regulatory-information/Education-Services-for-Overseas-Students-ESOS-Legislative-Framework/National-Code/Pages/default.aspx>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.ubss.edu.au/media/2716/what-is-meant-by-blended-learning.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.ubss.edu.au/media/2695/the-efficacy-of-online-studies.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.ubss.edu.au/media/2670/understanding-hybrid-delivery.pdf>

in the traditional face to face mode this was indeed a precarious and uninvited demand. For others it was the opportunity to put in place a variety of modes that could still maintain high levels of student engagement. Learner engagement (coupled with the student experience) – remember - is perceived as the end game.

My own institution appears to have fared well with the most recent (July 2021) Student Feedback on Units scoring 4.41/5 (the highest score since records were kept since T1, 2016), Staff Satisfaction scoring 4.3/5 and 92% of students noting that they would prefer to stay on line for the duration. Sector feedback suggests the aggregate is lower than this.

### **The pitfalls associated with returning to face to face classes on campus**

The return to campus movement has taken quite a few hits with flash lockdowns across the country. Some of the enforced lockdowns (Victoria has had five to date) have varied in length from 10 days to four months. The key issue being the unpredictability of closures (and durations) especially in some States with hair-trigger border closures accompanied by circuit breaker lock downs – both with very short fuses – and very little time to prepare. In this context face to face options seem dim.

A number of providers have recently formally announced they will continue online learning for the rest of 2021 – the news has not been well received in many quarters. What the decision has done though, is provided a degree of certainty and consistency – which is not a bad development in itself. It would appear online learning (and the associated variations) are here to stay for some time. Some predict that this will endure well into 2020.

### **The future of hLearning**

Hybrid Learning (hLearning) appears to be the future - or certainly the mode for the next couple of years. The model is based on delivering live sessions on line with the option for students to attend face to face by choice. Not unlike the concept of 'live to air' television.

The enormous advantage of the mode is the quick (and relatively easy) response mechanism to future lockdowns and restrictions. The acceptance of the notion of high end hygiene and COVID safety are also well accommodated in this mode. The worst case scenario is that the option of sitting in a classroom during a live delivery is suspended for a given period – but teaching and learning continues online without interruption.

The mode also provides students with the all-important option of on campus/off campus delivery. This is well received by students. For staff it requires delivery on site throughout the trimester/semester. This is less well received by staff – but for many regarded as a necessary evil. The issue of staff teaching on site is all about ensuring a quality output complete the with necessary technology standard and IT support.

### **Staff and student perceptions**

At the heart of the COVID-19 scenario is the impact that the changes have had on student experience. There is a mixed response to online learning. At the same time there has also been considerable acceptance of the mode not only in Australia but internationally<sup>5</sup>. This has been accompanied by an acknowledgement of the validity and currency of online learning (along with variations).

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<sup>5</sup> <http://thirdway.imgix.net/pdfs/one-year-later-covid-19s-impact-on-current-and-future-college-students.pdf>

There has been a considerable focus on student and staff response to online learning and teaching – and the outcomes vary from institution to institution. Mechanisms such as student feedback on units surveys; staff satisfaction surveys; satisfaction with online learning surveys; national QILT surveys relating to the overall student experience (the 2021 data collection commences in July 2021 and published in early 2022); industry group surveys; and a plethora of research surveys (both private and public) are all useful tools for gathering intelligence on and around student/staff satisfaction.

The best approach is internal survey. It is essential that all providers have a clear understanding of their own student/staff needs and respond quickly and appropriately to the needs expressed. If supported appropriately the outcomes and levels of satisfaction can be highly creditable and satisfying for all stakeholders.



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