Online Self-Access Learning Support During the COVID-19 Pandemic: An Australian University Case Study

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has had an enormous and unprecedented effect on higher education. Perhaps most notably, the virus catalysed a speedy movement to online delivery in response to the range of mandatory physical restrictions to campuses and classrooms around the world. To that end, this article discusses the online self-access student support options that were implemented at a mid-size public Australian university during March and April 2020. Drawing upon reflections from three student support leaders at the institution, it explores the rapid development and deployment of three new initiatives: self-access resources and videos for preparing to learn online, videoconference appointment options with learning advisers and librarians, and peer-to-peer virtual guides to online learning. It also comments on the implications of these programs for future practice, including the personally observed criticality of student feedback on accessible short video guides, flexible online individual support options and avenues for connecting with peers for technical support. Through this exploration and reflection, this article contributes to the new emerging body of literature on student support during the outbreak of COVID-19.

Keywords: COVID-19, self-access learning, online learning, student support, coronavirus

The COVID-19 pandemic has been one of the most significant global events of the 21st century, causing fundamental shifts in the ways people use technology and maintain social connections during times of mandatory self-isolation. The worldwide spread of the virus has had a particularly disruptive effect on the higher education sector. Many universities have been compelled to close physical campuses, adjust to changes in international student mobility, and rapidly deploy student support in an online environment. While these developments might catalyse some positive change in online teaching and learning practices (Lerman & Sen, 2020), there are millions of university students globally that have been significantly impacted by the immediate requirement to learn from home. Student barriers to online learning already existed in normal circumstances (Kelly, 2020; Muilenburg & Berge,

2005), yet trends in employment and technological access brought about by COVID-19 only increased these barriers for many students.

During early 2020, higher education institutions were generally unprepared for such a speedy transition to online delivery. There was simply no substantial scholarly literature that already existed on enacting such transitions that could have provided a model for universities to adopt quickly. Similarly, the broader implications of COVID-19 on teaching and learning were still being realised worldwide because the outbreak of the pandemic was unexpected and unprecedented in a modern context. While relevant literature was scarce, indicative published data suggested that students attempting to access additional support online was especially challenging. Drawing upon respondents from 267 institutions globally, an April 2020 Educause 'QuickPoll' indicated over a third of students found accessing advising services such as learning advisers and librarians either 'somewhat', 'moderately' or 'extremely' difficult during this transition into online learning (Grajeck, 2020). Such data and lack of literature highlights the clear current gap in scholarship on student self-access support in an online environment during the outbreak of COVID-19.

In this context, this article summarises and reflects on a suite of initiatives deployed at an Australian university to support students learning in an online environment. Written by three student support leaders at the institution, it provides an overview of how academic support outside of the curriculum was deployed through a holistic and coordinated approach during March and April 2020. Each leader—the Manager for Learning Support, an Associate University Librarian and the Peer Learning Coordinator—has contributed to authoring this article and includes personal perspectives on how three key self-access services were developed. These three initiatives include new self-access resources and videos for preparing to learn online, videoconference appointment options with learning advisers and librarians, and peer-to-peer virtual guides to online learning. The evidence included is primarily observational reflective accounts from the personal experiences, as the swift development of this additional online self-access support in a two-month period effectively prevented formal ethics approval for gathering student access rates, academic impact and feedback. Finally, it outlines the implications of these support services for future practice and offers broader conclusions about the impact of COVID-19 on self-access support in a post-pandemic world.

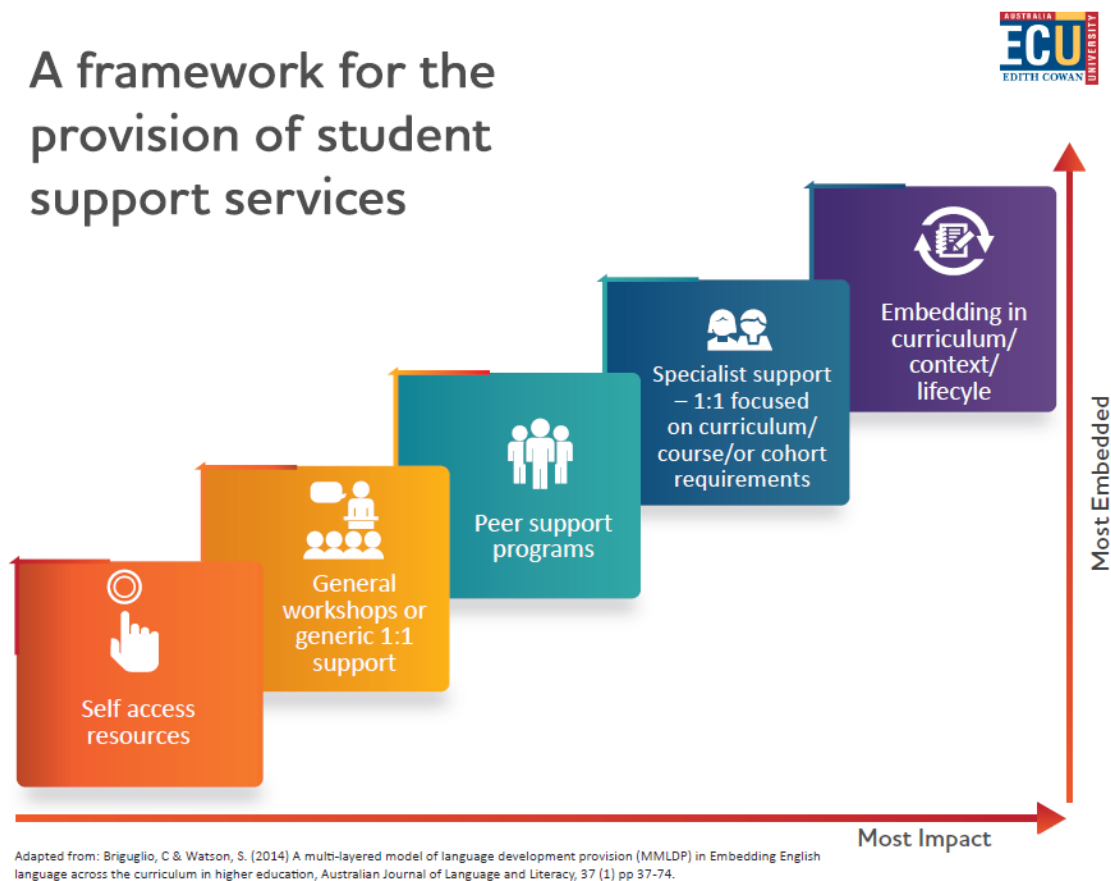### Context: Institutional Profile and its COVID-19 Response

The three initiatives explored in this article were developed at Edith Cowan University (ECU), a mid-size public university based in Western Australia. ECU has three

physical campuses, each of which offer self-access centers such as libraries, academic skills centers and spaces for academic peer support sessions. The institution also offers a range of different degree options at other locations including Sydney, Melbourne, Sri Lanka and Singapore. Before the outbreak of COVID-19 ECU had primarily offered degrees in a traditional on-campus environment, yet over the past several years, the university had also begun expanding some of its course offerings to online delivery mode options. As a result of this recent movement, there was a reasonable degree of preparedness for ECU to transition speedily much of its teaching and learning activities to off-campus temporarily, and thereby assist in combating the spread of the virus in its early stages.

However, like many other higher education institutions, this transition was not seamless for all students. ECU enrols a large number of students from equity groups (such as those from low socioeconomic backgrounds or first-in-family students), many of which often do not have reliable access to technology or an appropriate home study space. Throughout March and April 2020, the institution's swift response to the pandemic was thereby highly focused on student support. It included support such as expanding the loan scheme for laptops, offering financial hardship grants, extending the mid-semester study break, and allowing unit coordinators to increase the time period for assessment extensions. Learning support was also expanded, such as those referenced in the framework in Figure 1. While this framework highlights the intentional prioritisation of embedded learning support in the curriculum as the most effective way to impact positively student success in an academic context, it also demonstrates the varied ways in which self-access support is also provided at the institution.

Figure 1

ECU's Framework for the Provision of Support Services

A framework for the provision of student support services

Self access resources

General workshops or generic 1:1 support

Peer support programs

Specialist support – 1:1 focused on curriculum/ course/or cohort requirements

Embedding in curriculum/ context/ lifecyle

Most Embedded

Most Impact

Adapted from: Briguglio, C & Watson, S. (2014) A multi-layered model of language development provision (MMLDP) in Embedding English language across the curriculum in higher education, Australian Journal of Language and Literacy, 37 (1) pp 37-74.

Online Self-Access Learning Support

ECU's Library and its Centre for Learning and Teaching (CLT) focused on expanding academic support outside of the curriculum. In relation to Figure 1, the key areas that were expanded during this time were in steps 1 to 4 of this framework (reading from left to right). Some online support already existed, primarily in the form of resources such as workshop recordings, library guides and tip sheets. Many universities traditionally offer these types of online learning support but without accompanying options for live access to a learning adviser, librarian or peer leader (Andersson & Nakahashi, 2019). However, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic prompted the creation of three key new ECU support options: self-access resources and videos for preparing to learn online, videoconference appointments with learning advisers and librarians, and virtual peer support for online learning.

In order to support students rapidly prepare to learn in an online environment, professional support staff from the Library and CLT developed a series of short videos on navigating the learning technologies students would be using for learning, collaboration and creation. To prepare these videos, staff either utilised current technology skills in video production or rapidly upskilled in video creation by watching demonstrative videos online and the resources available on LinkedIn Learning. Clear guidelines were also set about how these videos must be put together: each one had to be five minutes or less, focus on the key steps for accessing critical online information using visual guides, and be accompanied by clear audio instructions. The audio and any written instructions needed to be intentionally positive and supportive in order to build student confidence and motivation about learning online (Muilenburg & Berge, 2005). They also needed to be peer reviewed by another team member before publication. Overall, a suite of videos was created for how to use Blackboard, Blackboard Collaborate, Microsoft Teams and Zoom. Each video included captions to improve accessibility for non-native English speakers and students with a hearing disability.

On reflection it would have been preferable to have students more directly involved in the creation of these videos and resources, either through creating these themselves or providing feedback on those originally created by staff. Student feedback before publication would have been especially insightful as each lived their own respective experiences of preparing to learn online for their own studies. Students may also have been able to identify critical gaps in video content that staff may have missed. This lack of direct student involvement was due in part to the frantic and intense nature of work that was required to prepare students to learn online at short notice. In other words, comprehensive planning and consultation for resource development did not simply feel feasible in practice during March 2020. Having some relevant and accessible resources available, even if they were not perfect, was a better option than aiming for flawless resources that could potentially be delayed due to extended consultation or preparation time needed. In future resources, however, student feedback will form a critical part of video creation for self-access resources before publication and wide circulation across the institution.

The videos, along with other self-access support, enabled students to attempt to resolve their issues or learn how to use the appropriate learning technology themselves first before approaching support staff. This scalable approach aligned with a recent survey of Australian and New Zealand students' expectations and experiences of digital technology in their learning, which found that students turn to online information first and only approach support staff after trying to resolve their problem individually (Beetham et al., 2019).

Feedback from academics during this period also indicated that with the increased number of students interacting online, there was a need for more self-access materials on online communication and etiquette. ECU has a Digital Essentials module that educates students on issues surrounding digital citizenship and e-safety (ECU Library, 2020). Additional resources were added to the module on communication, collaboration and etiquette when communicating in online learning spaces, in order to help facilitate the transition for students from communicating and collaborating in face to face class environments to online class discussions.

Individual Videoconference Appointments with Learning Advisers and Librarians

The second initiative for increased online self-access support came through offering online options for individual appointments with learning advisers and librarians. Traditionally offered via face-to-face or telephone, an online appointment management system was established to allow ECU students to book sessions with either type of staff member via a videoconference call using Microsoft Teams. This allowed students to connect with a university support staff member via online video and discuss study related queries in real-time. As part of establishing these self-access support options, internal training in the use of relevant technologies about strategies for engaging students via online appointments was especially critical (García, 2018). Due to time constraints in preparing for online support, much of this training occurred informally through a community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991). In short, staff met regularly to problem-solve shared challenges and establish consistent processes that suited the type of support that was being offered to students.

When students book appointments with learning advisers, students can ask questions about studying, seek help in understanding an assessment task, or share a written draft and receive feedback. Online appointments were also available in developing English language and numeracy skills. In each session students connected with a learning adviser using Microsoft Teams, using the share screen function and Microsoft Whiteboard App to communicate and discuss study related topics. Traditionally learning adviser appointments are 30 minutes in duration; however, due to the increase in demand and inability to continue some on-campus support, 15-minute appointment options were offered to accommodate a greater number of students seeking additional learning support. These appointment lengths facilitated greater capacity to cope with increased demand yet were sometimes detrimental to individual students as each had less time to gather feedback from an entire assignment draft or ask enough questions to confirm understanding of a task. As appointment times were never entirely booked out (and, according to staff, those that were delivered felt too short to provide

meaningful support), learning adviser appointments returned to a 30-minute duration time by mid-2020. This was an important reflection for the team; staff observed that there was indeed a minimum period of time for a learning adviser appointment to be useful, particularly when focusing on a draft of student writing.

Before the move to online teaching during the pandemic, postgraduate students could book face to face appointments with librarians, but shorter queries from undergraduate students on research and referencing were managed through self-access support such as library guides, email responses, in-class instruction and drop-in sessions. In order to support students while studying online, a booking system was established whereby all ECU students were able to directly book 15 minute online or phone appointments with librarians for support with research, referencing or Endnote. This service took on the form of a 'virtual reference desk' and enabled students to make point of need virtual appointments with librarians to support them while they were unable to come to campus. Librarians found that the 15 minute time slot was adequate for answering referencing queries which tend to be shorter in nature, and that having online appointments allowed for seamless transition from one appointment to the next, especially as there is no time needed for setting up equipment or moving from open office spaces to meeting rooms. The online system was not without issues, however, as not all students understood the instructions for accessing the online appointment. There were also some minor technical issues as librarians learnt to use a new system in a short period of time.

Peer-to-Peer Virtual Guides to Online Learning

The third initiative offered online options for peer-led support. ECU has a number of peer mentoring programs, ranging from volunteers mentoring first year students to unit-specific peer academic learning programs such as Peer Assisted Study Sessions (PASS). Peer-led support is a well-established initiative in many higher education institutions, both nationally and internationally, to help students adjust to the challenges of tertiary learning (Huijser et al., 2008). Prior to the move to online learning, both the Library Services Centre and CLT employed peer leaders to provide students with 'at the elbow' support with academic learning and learning technologies. After teaching on ECU campuses was halted, these face to face services were temporarily discontinued, leaving a gap in peer-led support. Two experienced and trained on-campus peer support teams—CLT's Peer Advisers and the Library's SALT (Student Assistance with Learning Technologies)—were merged to form one Virtual Peer Support team (VEEPS).

VEEPS gave students live access to peer-to-peer guidance through the new challenges of adjusting to self-directed online learning. Students called or initiated an online chat to

connect almost instantly with a VEEPS staff member via Microsoft Teams during service hours, which spanned normal business hours as well as early evening and weekend hours to provide flexible options for access. VEEPS acted as a virtual triage service, essentially performed technical troubleshooting and advised students on what support was available. A key part of the VEEPS role was guiding fellow students through the technical challenges arising when on-campus assignments, such as oral group presentations, needed to be replaced with alternative assessments using learning technologies such as Panopto (ECU's licenced video creation software tool). Moreover, much of the training for the role—developed collaboratively by the VEEPS team and Peer Learning Coordinator—focused on normalising help seeking behaviour and reducing anxiety. The virtual peer guides played a vital role in reassuring students accessing the service that they both understood and had gone through similar experiences working out how to operate online.

Similar to learning adviser and librarian appointments, Microsoft Teams was the chosen digital platform for its flexibility, capacity for video calls and, most importantly, the way that Teams allowed VEEPS and students to share screens with each other to more easily identify problems and offer step by step solutions. The flexibility of chat enabled VEEPS staff to follow up any concerns after the 'drop in' interaction by posting additional resource material in the chat channel. A phone call option was also deployed for those students less familiar with online technology. While the Peer Learning Coordinator observed that more students used the Microsoft Teams chat (62%) than made phone calls, the significant proportion of students calling (38%) indicates the need for multiple modes to support students effectively in a digital environment. Students also commonly left questions on chat after service hours, which VEEPS answered when they came on shift. The asynchronous nature of Microsoft Teams meant that not only were Western Australia based students still supported after the move to online learning, but external or offshore students were also able to access these virtual peer guides. In effect, the VEEPS service provided a wider reach in student support than the traditional on-campus service.

Figure 2

VEEPS Promotional Material - Virtual Peer Support for Online Learning at ECU

Implications for Practice

Each of these new initiatives addressed a demonstrable need for supporting students to learn in an online environment, especially for students that were required to shift rapidly to off-campus learning due to the institution's response to COVID-19. These actions, however, will have benefits beyond the short-term needs of current students. Like many other institutions, ECU will be far better equipped to offer a comprehensive suite of self-access learning support to students in a post-pandemic world, whether they are studying on-campus or off-campus. Support staff were required to upskill their respective digital literacy skills and the improve the ways in which learning support services were provided in an online context. Self-access videos for preparing to learn online provide a sustainable and scalable method for providing support to new online students. The processes established for online appointment options with learning advisers, librarians and peer leaders will also continue into the post-pandemic world, offering flexibility for both on campus and off campus students.

Another key implication for these programs was that it highlighted gaps or obstacles in the self-access resources that were currently offered. For instance, frequent student requests for finding information that was already available in ECU's online academic skills

website indicated a need to develop a short navigation video for finding relevant guides and tip-sheets. This also gave important feedback to the learning adviser team about how this site needed to be designed in an environment in which an entire student population is studying online. Trends in student support requests also led to the development of other resources, such as the creation of a video that stepped through how to create and submit a video assignment (the most common reason a student contacted VEEPS for assistance).

A final consideration for future practice is the need for student support services such as self-access learning centers to be adaptable and flexible in a rapidly changing world. The impact of COVID-19 highlighted that significant changes to a learning environment can have a direct impact on the ways in which students access support and the types of support that are most needed. Put another way, students need support relevant to the point in time in which such support is sought. To some extent this is self-evident, yet it is crucial for staff working in self-access centers to reflect continually on whether previous support practices serve the best interests of students when the learning environment is significantly altered. This is relevant in an on-campus context and how physical spaces are utilised, but also in how new digital technologies can be leveraged to facilitate convenient and scalable options for accessing academic support.

Conclusion

Almost all university staff and students globally have been fundamentally challenged by the spread of COVID-19 and its impact on normal teaching and learning activities. In this context, options for self-access learning play a critical role in supporting students to continue succeeding academically during difficult circumstances. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, this article provided one Australian example of new self-access student support and explored how these three initiatives were set up so that they will have long-term benefits for the institution. Through this period, the authors observed that the availability of short video guides, flexible online individual support options and avenues for connecting with peers for technical support have all been critical factors in ensuring student success. Continually reflecting on the extent to which current support practices meet the needs of student cohorts are also important, as learning contexts evolve over time and can change especially quickly during times of global instability. It is hoped that through exploring these programs and providing corresponding reflections that they provide useful models for adopting by other higher education institutions as they navigate respective responses to COVID-19 and beyond.

Notes on the Contributors

Dr. Andrew Kelly is the Manager, Learning Support at Edith Cowan University. Dr. Nicole Johnston is the Associate University Librarian (Digital and Information Literacy) at Edith Cowan University. Dr. Sharon Matthews is the Peer Learning Coordinator at Edith Cowan University. The authors all work within the Deputy-Vice-Chancellor (Education) portfolio at this institution, which is responsible for the advancement of high-quality teaching and learning as well as student support.

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