




STUDENT IDENTITIES IN TIMES OF CHANGE

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Charles Sturt University, a multi-campus, regional university, comprises diverse student cohorts. It is the role of the Learning Skills Advisers (LSAs) to meet the learning needs of the student body. In order to address these needs effectively, student identities need to be recognised and acknowledged. Internationalisation, globalisation, increased accountability and online services require different responses from universities in the way they foster and encourage lifelong learning within learning communities. This paper will be co-written by team players from the Wagga Wagga, Goulburn, Albury, Bathurst, and Dubbo Campuses. Each member will contribute information and anecdotal evidence regarding respective student cohorts and, due to the knowledge obsolescence of five years, will reflect upon past, current and predicted programs in relation to acknowledging changing student identities and, hence, meeting changing student needs. Student cohorts to be discussed will be restricted to include Distance Education students and International students. External contexts, in combination with developments in related fields, have an impact on our identities as LSAs within our institutions.



Learning Skills Advisers are now further challenged by the inconstant identities of learners during this time of continuous change.

Higher Education environments in Australia and abroad are facing a period of unprecedented transformation and rate of change (CSU 2001). Today education is increasingly demand driven. Traditional boundaries between disciplines are less appropriate. University education has moved from elitist to essentially being universal and continuous, national and international. It is more accessible as the offering of universities have broadened and taken on a vital role within lifelong learning. The more obvious links with workplace learning and more flexible delivery modes are worth noting.

From its platform of young, but highly successful university, Charles Sturt University's (CSU's) strategic planning process and new initiatives will provide the basis for '*thrival*' within these times of uncertainty and instability.

"Education is not just about transferring 'chunks of knowledge' but about establishing meaningful relationships between teachers and learners...The challenges of supporting, valuing and affirming learning and teaching...are set within this relational context" (Green & Battersby 2001). Students coming to CSU 'reflect a greater diversity of experience, ethnicity, expectations and preparedness than ever before' (Shapiro & Lavine 1999, p.2). This paper will raise awareness of the diverse learner identities present on CSU campuses. It will focus on Distance Education (DE) students and International students.

The Chinese Buddhist Monks of the Temple of ShaoLin have a traditional greeting. Upon meeting a person, they most respectfully bow to the left, bow to the middle, and bow to the right. This custom signifies respect and value for the past, the present and the future of that individual. As reflective practitioners, it behoves us to embrace this concept. Hence, a brief retrospective student profile will be offered along with evidence indicating past (early 1980s to 1990s for DE students and, 1950s to 1980s for International students), present and future shifts in student identities. Our role as LSAs is challenged by these changes; insight will be given regarding initiatives to meet these changing identities of learners.



Distance Education Students

Student Profile

A large proportion of students have returned to study as mature aged students, approaching their study with little or no recent experience in academic literacy, research skills and, for some, particularly rural and isolated students, minimal technological skills and limited access to online material and services.

A synopsis of characteristics of DE students in the past will be presented in Table 1; Table 2 presents identities of DE students at the present; and, Table 3 projects student identities of the future. These tables enable us to note the impact that student identities have and will have on LSAs and staff endeavouring to meet their needs. These demands will only increase in the future.

In the past five years we have advanced from snail mail to instant articles. The wonderful technological system has bridged the isolation of numerous students, but paradoxically perhaps, has isolated the accessibility of staff. That is, can staff keep up with students' demands? We need to develop strategies to bridge the gap between what is on offer and what needs to be delivered.

Increased diversity raises the need to know our DE students better: their educational preparation, their perspective regarding higher education, work commitments, financial needs, family responsibilities, vocational and community experiences. There is a need to connect more effectively with the range of DE students and their needs.