

## Digital integrity and the teaching/learning nexus: Taking the pedagogical pulse of the multi- location university

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### Abstract

This case study considers questions of pedagogical and educational integrity in relation to multi-location or distributed learning environments that deploy blended learning models. Specifically, we engage with the implications of these models in light of recommendations that Australian universities continue to improve access for students from low socio-economic backgrounds and other identified equity groups. We provide an overview of the critical success factors germane to the implementation of these models at the University of Wollongong in 2000 and examine some of the pressure points that have emerged as the project expands into 2010.

### Introduction

Our case study engages with two models of teaching and learning: the blended model, comprising a combination of multimedia technologies and face-to-face teaching and learning; and the multi-location or distributed learning environment. In the past twelve years or so, these modes of higher education delivery have allowed universities to expand their footprint by creating geographically diverse campus networks that utilise various combinations of multimedia teaching and learning technologies such as videoconferencing, web-based resources, online discussion spaces and pod-cast lectures. The creation of digitally enhanced distributed learning environments has also made higher education accessible for those who might not otherwise be able to achieve a university degree.

As Australian universities adapt to meet recommendations made in the Final Report on the 2008 Review of Australian Higher Education (Bradley et al., 2008) to make university education more accessible to Indigenous students, domestic students of low socio-economic status, as well as other identified equity groups, multi-location blended learning environments present attractive possibilities for widening participation. Nevertheless, there are key questions to be considered in the deployment of these educational models if they are to sustain pedagogical and, indeed, educational integrity, not least in relation to implications for the workloads of teaching teams working in these environments, and the provision of effective learning support for students from equity backgrounds so that they make a successful transition into university study. Because attrition rates and the quality of the first year undergraduate student experience have attracted increasing attention in the last few years, the primary focus of this case study will be on those entering higher education for the first time via a multi-location blended learning environment.

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Although often combined, multi-location and digitally enhanced blended models present discrete challenges for teachers and students. Typically, digital learning assumes if not so-called 'digital natives', then at least a student cohort already successfully migrated into a multimedia environment (Butler & Sellbom, 2002; Clegg et al., 2003; Aspden & Helm, 2004). However, we cannot assume that all those who access higher education through a regional campus will necessarily have the technological experience or computer literacies required to successfully interact with multimedia resources. The stresses of beginning a new program of study, particularly if one is from a so-called 'non-traditional' background, can be only compounded if technological proficiencies are not to a standard assumed by the curricula. As Geraldine Lefoe and John Hedberg (2006) argue, some students coming into this sort of environment will require sustained support beyond orientation if they are to make a successful transition into their first year of study.

Successful transition into higher education for equity students will also often be contingent on how effectively their wider academic learning in those early stages of study is supported by teachers (we use the term 'teacher' to also refer to tutors employed on a sessional basis) and subject coordinators (Lefoe et al., 2002a; Tait, 2004). But for geographically-dispersed teaching teams, creating and sustaining effective lines of communication within the team can present significant challenges as subject coordinators struggle with the complex workloads presented by multi-location blended models and sessional teachers employed on a casual basis struggle to overcome the professional isolation of working in a regional setting (Beaumont et al., 2009).

We consider these issues in the following discussion as we also review past and current practices at our university. In doing so, we critically engage and broaden notions of integrity and examine the concept in relation to future iterations of the models under discussion. We have utilised a case study format to structure discussion because it facilitates a review of good practice principles in relation to multi-location and blended learning models as it also allows us to examine how these principles have been applied in a specific context. Furthermore, the case study format allows us to incorporate insights into how these models are received by students and tutors working in multi-location learning environments.

Beyond their institutional significance, regional university campuses have meaning – culturally and socially – for those who come to study from the wider host communities. This local socio-cultural value is perhaps the most difficult aspect of the multi-location, blended learning model to quantify. Even so, we will attempt to provide limited insight into this aspect through examination of some of the empirical frameworks bearing on student experiences of higher education in these types of communities because in some way they must have bearing on how universities conceptualise and manage their connections to these communities. Since the massification of university education in the latter decades of the twentieth century, debate has continued about what increased access to higher education means in terms of increased human capital (James, 2000; Bowl, 2001; Leathwood & O'Connell, 2003). Certainly, this is a concern that seems to resonate in the Bradley Report's (2008) engagement with the ramifications of widening participation in Australian higher education.

What follows cannot be said to be an unbiased engagement: all the authors currently teach in distributed blended learning environments in various ways. Two of the authors were also undergraduate students in this sort of learning environment and bring that perspective into discussion about the critical success factors as well as some of the pitfalls associated with multi-location, blended learning models. We argue that the insights afforded by these 'up close and personal' perspectives enrich current conversations about multi-location blended learning experience and provide potentially fruitful ideas for future iterations of the model. It needs to be said at this point that, for various reasons, all authors have a committed investment in this style of

higher education delivery and both the educational and pedagogical integrity of the model.

### **Inception**

Our university was an early adopter of the multi-location blended model, establishing a network of three campuses, or 'Access Centres', in regional and rural communities in 2000. In the early years of operation these campuses provided opportunities for students to work towards a Bachelor of Arts, Bachelor of Business Administration, or Commerce degree. At this early stage, the Centres attracted a high proportion of mature age students, many of whom were also the first in their family to attempt university study (Lefoe et al., 2002a). By 2010, two more Centres had been added to the network and while still attracting a significant number of mature age students, they now see increased numbers of school leavers. Some of these younger students come to a regional campus as first choice and some because their university entry score is not high enough to permit enrolment at a larger campus so they use a year at a regional centre as an alternative approach to their preferred degree program. As the regional campus network has continued to evolve, some of the campuses have expanded to include degrees including the Bachelor of Nursing, Bachelor of Mathematics Education, Bachelor of Science Education, Masters of Business Administration, Graduate Diploma of Education, and the combined Bachelor of Medicine and Bachelor of Surgery.

A great deal of research, thought and effort went into designing curricula for the inception of what became known as the South Coast Education Network (SCEN) (Bell & Lefoe, 1998; Albury, 2001; Lefoe et al., 2001). Various local community and government stakeholders were invited into conversation about what kind of degree programs would be most valuable to their regional communities. Consideration was given to subject designs best suited to multi-location blended learning. For example, the Faculty of Arts created core subjects for the degree program that comprised a blend of videoconference lectures; weekly face-to-face tutorials; subject-specific elearning sites with learning resources and formal and informal student discussion sites; subject workbooks and/or readers. Subject coordinators were provided with extensive training on how to adapt their teaching styles to a multimedia environment and how to construct subjects that would provide rich learning experiences for their students. There was consultation with academics and staff from across the university about how best to support student learning needs in this sort of environment. Vigorous campaigns were instigated to recruit tutors local to the communities where the centres were to be located. As part of their professional development, tutors were then provided with a substantial orientation that included sessions on conflict resolution within the classroom; the provision of assessment feedback for students; teaching tips and small group learning techniques; and an introduction to the university's codes of practice. Efforts were made to clearly delineate roles within multi-location teaching teams and create effective lines of communication.

In the first years of operation lectures were usually delivered weekly or, in some subjects, fortnightly, via videoconference. More recently, podcast lectures with PowerPoint slides that students can access via the subject web site have become an option for subject delivery. Navigating the complexities of a multimedia environment, while also developing effective learning strategies can often create barely manageable levels of stress for new students (Lefoe et al., 2001; Lefoe et al., 2002a; Clegg et al., 2003; Stirling & Rossetto, 2007). Commencing university study can be a daunting experience for any new student; for equity students it can be all but overwhelming (Bowl, 2001; Leathwood & O'Connell, 2003).

Early iterations of the multi-location blended model at the centre of this case study recognised the specificities of teaching and learning in these sorts of challenging environments. Tutors were paid to attend videoconference lectures at each of the

regional campuses to facilitate student engagement with the technology and encourage the development of learning styles best suited to the environment. They were then able draw out ideas raised in the lectures in the weekly tutorial sessions. In recognition of the challenges represented by this sort of learning environment for new students, weekly tutorial sessions were usually two hours in length to afford time for tutors to scaffold the development of academic and technological capacities such that students could cultivate those independent learning styles so necessary in the multi-location blended environment. It was deemed that learning support was essential for new students in 'this new learning environment' (Lefoe et al., 2002a), as was contact with the wider academic community. Lefoe et al. (2002a) note that: "Visits to the centres by the Dean and Associate Dean to give academic advice provided visible support for students (and tutors) and modelled a practice of occasional centre visits which they were encouraging teaching staff to follow" (p.47).

Adrianna Kezar (2004) argues that universities have an obligation to recognise and honour 'ongoing and meaningful' relationships to society; that higher education has a role to play in the cultural, intellectual and ethical life of the community. As aspirational as this sounds, we suggest that the multi-location blended learning model at the centre of this case study manifested these characteristics in the planning, implementation and development through those early years, a point to which we will return.

In an early review of the model, Lefoe et al. (2002a) identified the key emergent issues as "pedagogical, technological, learning support and administrative" (p.42). Recommendations for addressing these issues included developing learning communities at each of the centres which were expansive enough to include subject tutors and lecturers/coordinators; providing sustained technical and learning support for students, particularly in the early stages of their degree programs; ensuring ready access for students and tutors to subject resources; developing administrative processes to facilitate student communication with the central campus (Lefoe et al., 2002a). While recognising the crucial role of local tutors in the student learning experience, Lefoe et al. also recommended that consistent lines of communication with the subject lecturer be established and maintained. As Lefoe and Hedberg (2006) argued several years later, "Delivering and accessing a blended program requires new ways of thinking about teaching and learning".

It becomes apparent from a review of the literature that the critical success factors of multi-location blended learning models must include clear and ongoing recognition of the teaching and learning specificities particular to these environments (Laurillard, 1995; Laurillard, 2002; Simpson & Yunfei, 2004; Lefoe & Hedberg, 2006). Students, particularly in their first year of study, require teaching and learning support infrastructure that recognises and responds to the demands of a student-centred, multimedia learning environment such that they develop those academic capacities essential to successful progression through their degree (James, 2000; Osborne, 2003; Stirling & Rossetto, 2007; Andrade, 2007-8). There also needs to be recognition of what constitutes pedagogical integrity in these sorts of teaching and learning environments. These are all recurring themes in the literature in this field (Thomas, 2002; Tait, 2004; Tastle et al., 2005; Knight et al., 2007).

As deployment of these models has become more established, however, new problems have begun to emerge. Lefoe and Hedberg (2006) comment on the increased workloads for subject coordinators and tutors in multi-location blended environments and argue that the reduced face-to-face teaching that has begun to creep into more recent iterations of the model, place a greater imperative on students for independent learning. They also point out that poor communication between subject coordinators and geographically dispersed teaching teams can result in inconsistencies in the implementation of subject content and assessment of academic work.

In multi-location blended teaching and learning environments the role of tutors in facilitating student transition and retention has now been well recognised (Williford et al., 2000-1; Lefoe et al., 2002b; Thomas, 2002; Alavi et al., 2002; Yorke, 2004; Tait, 2004; Andrade, 2007-8) and if student cohorts continue to expand in accordance with Bradley Report recommendations, retention of students from identified equity groups will emerge as a pressure point for these models. By 2000 Simon Marginson had already drawn our attention to the impact of growing staff casualisation on the integrity of academic function, suggesting that teachers hired on a sessional basis are more often than not excluded from the collegiality of the institution. Jo Tait (2004) made a similar point. A 2006 initiative at the University of Wollongong evaluated the status of sessional teachers working in multi-location environments and confirmed the professional isolation often experienced because of breakdowns in communication between subject coordinators and multi-location teaching teams. The researchers concluded that "In general, current policy framing recruitment and employment, ongoing training and professional development, evaluation and recognition, continue to fall short [because] of the growing casualisation among higher education teaching cohorts" (Beaumont et al., 2009, p.152). *The RED Report* (Percy et al., 2008) circulated by the Australian Learning and Teaching Council acknowledged the university system's increasing reliance on its sessional teachers, an academic cohort central to the multi-location blended model under discussion here. Yet despite demands created by massification in the Australian higher education sector and an increasingly casualised teaching workforce, the development of sustainable and effective policies relevant to the complex and crucially important roles of sessional teachers remains largely absent from most university agendas. It is an absence that demands scrutiny, not least because of the implications for academic and educational integrity.

Ideas of integrity have particular currency in today's academic environment. Kezar (2004) argues that universities 'obtain integrity' through an institutional mindfulness of and respect for their connections and responsibilities to wider society. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines integrity as:

The condition of having no part or element taken away or lacking; undivided state; completeness. The condition of not being marred or violated; unimpaired or uncorrupted condition; original state; soundness. ... b) Soundness of moral principle; the character of uncorrupted virtue; uprightness, honesty, sincerity.

The homepage for the *Asia Pacific Forum on Educational Integrity* (APFEI) defines the concept as:

a commitment to the key values of honesty, trust, equity, respect and responsibility, and the translation of these values into action (adapted from the Center for Academic Integrity "The Fundamental Values of Academic Integrity" 1999). This view of integrity involves much more than a commitment from students not to cheat. Academic integrity is multi-dimensional and is enabled by all those in the educational enterprise, from students to parents, instructors and administrators. It is for this reason that APFEI prefaces 'integrity' with 'educational' rather than 'academic'. From the first conference in 2003, we have attempted to encapsulate the complex aspects and numerous stakeholders of integrity across the various educational sectors, with a clear intention not to limit the topic to universities.

The multi-dimensionality of what constitutes educational integrity is at the heart of this case study as we engage with the tensions between the good practice recommendations in the literature on multi-location blended learning models and the realities of trying to sustain these models beyond inception.

At its most rudimentary, educational integrity is understood as referring to appropriate acknowledgement practices in the production of academic work. But as the APFEI definition indicates, educational integrity is necessarily complex and in some sense must apply to all levels of academic policy and practice. All the above sources, in one way or another, gesture to a notion of integrity that refers to a state of completeness and soundness; a notion that somehow signifies a set of coherent relationships between university and society, between higher education policy and practice, between curricula design and delivery.

As the layers of management within today's universities become ever more complex, one of the forms of integrity under threat is the cohesive integrity between managerial policy, pedagogy and academic practice; or, in other words, between the theory, policy and practices of multi-location blended teaching and learning. Marginson (2000) argues that as 'academic function' becomes increasingly vulnerable to the pressures of the market place and corporatisation, universities are in danger of ceding the 'distinctive' contributions higher education can make to society to the demands of governance and fiscal competitiveness. Hugh Davis and Karen Fill (2007) note that the integrity of blended learning models is vulnerable to degradation when:

[T]he champions retire or move on they may sometimes be replaced by staff who are not as enthused. Faced with many demands on their time and not fully briefed about why and how blended approaches have been developed, incoming teachers may drop or reduce the online components. They may feel unable to defend the approach when questioned by colleagues or students. (p.822)

This 'changing of the guard' in our case study model presents yet another potential pressure point. Increasing academic workloads, demands for cost-effective courses and modes of delivery, loss of recognition of the specificities attendant to teaching and learning in multi-location blended environments, all have quite profound implications for the model. Integrity – in all its ideational forms – is at risk of erasure because of this institutional conundrum. As we engage with this idea at length in the following sections of this case study, we review earlier iterations of the multi-location blended model deployed by the University of Wollongong from a student perspective. We then go on to discuss the significance of regional Access Centres to the wider community.

### **'Learning communities': a student perspective, 2000-05**

Establishment of the South Coast Education Network (SCEN) by the University of Wollongong in 2000 signalled the beginning of a new era of higher education possibilities for students living in these regions of New South Wales. For newly-enrolled students, many of whom were undertaking university study for the first time, the key strengths of the multi-location blended learning model lay with the effective combination of face-to-face teaching and new digital learning technologies. By combining weekly classroom-based tutorials that provided vital face-to-face learning support with videoconference lectures and other learning resources delivered via digital technology, the model represented an important departure from traditional external or correspondence-style tertiary study options. The enrolment of significant numbers of mature aged students (Albury, 2001; Lefoe et al., 2002a) in the early years of the SCEN reflected the welcome opportunities this model provided to aspiring university graduates in the region.

Drawing on the experiences of students enrolled in the formative years of the SCEN, two factors critical to the early successes of the model can be identified. Firstly, the effectiveness of this blended learning approach can be attributed to the creation of strong and vibrant learning communities at each of the regional Access Centres.

These learning communities were underpinned by a clear recognition of the specificities of multi-location and blended teaching and learning environments. Identification of the challenges presented by these new educational environments informed the provision of support to both teachers and students by way of specific training to negotiate the new learning technologies and ensure easy access to resources.

This support was combined with the establishment of clear lines of communication with the central campus via teaching staff (both Access Centre-based tutors and central campus-based subject coordinators), the Centre managers and library staff. The learning communities that grew from these conditions were both contained and coherent as individual sites, and connected and complimentary to the central campus and wider university community. As Lefoe et al. (2002a) noted in their review of the SCEN model, fostering learning communities at each of the Centres through the provision of technological and pedagogical support, and ensuring connectivity across the sites through effective communication, is critical to the ongoing success of the model.

Also integral to the creation of strong learning communities at the Access Centres was the role of people. The face-to-face interaction between individuals involved in this teaching/learning process facilitated engagement with the digital technologies integral to the blended learning model and fostered a community of learning. The points of contact within these communities were wide and varied and included interaction between students and tutors, students and centre management and other support staff, and importantly, peer-to-peer interaction between students. The peer support and collegiality resulting from these relationships worked to inspire and motivate students and staff alike, and build an effective and sustainable academic environment.

Not only was the role of tutors crucial to new students successfully finding their way into this environment, as the conduit between regional-based students and the central campus-based subject coordinators, they were the principal teaching 'face' of the university and thus provided a vital link between the geographically-distanced student body and a wider university study experience. As well as providing pedagogical support, tutors became the main point of reference for students as they learned how to navigate the university system, and an important source of motivation and inspiration that strongly influenced the university study experience and success for individual students. The bridging role of the tutor between Access Centres and the central campus was further strengthened in this empirical framework by regular visits from central campus-based subject coordinators and other academics. These visits nurtured a sense of belonging to the wider university community among Centre-based students and staff, and served to further validate the university study experience of the Access Centre-based student.

The second clearly identifiable success factor evident in the early years of the SCEN was the level of pedagogical integrity underpinning the design and delivery of courses offered. As with the implementation of policies and practices that worked to build strong learning communities, a clear recognition of the specificities of the multi-location blended teaching and learning context was evident in the course design. Rather than simply adapting subjects offered on the central campus, a range of subjects were designed and developed to suit the particularities of the blended learning approach. Attention was paid to modes of delivery – videoconference, web-based, face-to-face, and so forth – and innovative teaching and learning models developed to enhance the multimedia experience. By including subject content relevant to both regional and global contexts and providing technological support to teachers and students to enable effective teaching and learning, stimulating and flexible learning environments were created. Flexible subject delivery encouraged self-directed learning and enabled students to adopt a study approach best suited to their

individual life circumstances. And importantly, incorporation of this recognition of the specificities of the multimedia, multi-location study experience into the design and delivery of subjects worked to enhance student learning by validating their position as regional or rural students, acknowledging their mode of access to higher education, and providing support accordingly.

### **Socio-cultural value: an empirical perspective**

For those living in small regional and rural communities, access to higher education via a small local campus opens up a range of new possibilities. To quantify the positive effects of local access to higher education for host communities is beyond the parameters of this case study; rather, we offer examples from our combined teaching practices at the various campuses to indicate some of the qualitative effects for these communities. The following anecdotes have application at all of the Centres in the regional network.

A significant number of students of school-leaving age commencing undergraduate degrees at these campuses are from low socio-economic backgrounds where neither parent has experienced tertiary education at the university level. Upon graduating, these students are often the first in their immediate and extended family to complete a degree and this has the potential to set a path for younger siblings to follow. In the case of mature age students commencing an undergraduate degree, there have been several instances where a student's spouse has also enrolled in a degree following in the wake of their partner. Another pattern of enrolment discernible at the Access Centres is when the parent of a younger student embarks on a degree either at the same time as their child or soon after. In all three examples the sibling, spouse or parent has observed or shared the positive higher educational experience of somebody close to them and decided to embark on their own academic journey. The reach of the university, and the value of that to individuals and the wider community, demonstrates the spread of educational equity in areas where this was not likely to occur prior to the inception of the regional Access Centres.

The effect of equitable educational opportunities in these regional areas stretches beyond the local undergraduates and alumni. Undoubtedly, the university has created a 'pebble in the pond' effect whereby students take their new knowledge and wisdom directly into the community either in their chosen field of employment, or more generally. An example of the qualitative effects of higher education on local communities comes from a student who works as a labourer/concreter under a flexible arrangement that allows him to attend classes at one of the regional campuses. Enrolled in a Bachelor of Arts degree and in his final year, this student is well versed in the traditional features of a liberal arts education in relation to various issues associated with differences in gender, class and race. At various times during tutorial discussions he has described scenes at his workplace where fellow workers on building sites have spoken in a way that might be viewed as racist or prejudiced to a minority group. According to the student, the minority groups that are most commonly targeted in his place of work are Indigenous Australians, Muslims, homosexuals and asylum seekers arriving by boat in northern Australia.

The student in question has described occasions where he has said something during informal lunchtime discussions to counter a derogatory remark aimed at a minority group and in doing so has challenged the dominant discourse existing at his workplace. What results from this challenge nobody can be sure, but what is certain is that the student has taken with him information and knowledge from the academy and provided a counterpoint to a group of people who were perhaps previously not privileged with the insights and information that can accompany a university education. This is not to say that the action of the student will change the behaviour of the person responsible for the derogatory comment, but he has planted a seed that has the potential to open up a new way of thinking about a particular issue for a group



of people in the community. In the builders' lunchtime scenario, the effects of regional campuses on the wider community can be seen to be far greater from a social perspective than what might be measured in terms of employment outcomes and graduate salaries. It is a scenario that accords with Kezar's (2004) argument that universities 'obtain integrity' through the impact they have on society.

Of course there are other, more tangible, benefits that exist as well. The presence of the university in these regional areas gives employers the opportunity to hire local graduates or undergraduates in work-study arrangements that link university learning with the workplace, which in turn, also has the potential to extend the reach of higher education. The regional campuses are in a position to build strong relationships between the university and the community through various activities such as public lectures and research presentations, the occasional offering of undergraduate subjects to the broader community free of tuition fees, school liaison events and local graduation ceremonies that are family-oriented and involve local members of the business and public sector community.

### **Moving forward?**

The design and implementation of early iterations of the multi-location blended learning model deployed by the University of Wollongong clearly reflect an awareness of the importance of educational integrity in its broadest sense. Creating strong learning communities through recognition of the particularities of the model and providing appropriate support to ensure effective teaching and learning in this context were unambiguous indicators of the University's commitment to the multi-dimensional concepts suggested by the APFEI definition. A recognition of and commitment to pedagogical integrity was at the core of the inception of the SCEN project. The "new ways of thinking" referred to by Lefoe and Hedberg (2006) were evidenced in the innovative design and flexible delivery of subjects. Designing an Arts degree program with a Major specific to the SCEN contributed to the academic integrity of the study experience for students. The program enhanced the SCEN student experience by emphasising the regional context of the project; attaching a sense of validity to the form and content of subjects studied; and recognising the equity considerations inherent with this teaching and learning context through thoughtful and reflective course design.

The success of the initial model was reflected in the academic performance of students. The University Medal for academic excellence has twice gone to regional campus students, as have other major academic awards and recognitions of academic merit. There have been steady increases in student enrolments and graduates; an increased range of subject and degree programs offered; and a new academic culture that has seen regional graduates complete successful Honours degrees and post-graduate studies. This has resulted in a number of Alumni being hired by faculties to be tutors at various Access Centres. In the ten years that the campuses have been operational, at least six of the regional Alumni are completing doctoral theses under the supervision of academics located at the central campus.

The increased use of online digital technologies for research purposes has largely facilitated this growth. The availability of online archives, e-books and electronic journal publications means that regional students can access resources that were not as readily available to them more than ten years ago. However, and despite these undoubted benefits, a worrying trend in the latter years of operation is an increasing reliance on technology as a substitute for face-to-face contact with tutors at the regional campuses, and with subject coordinators at the central campus. The key strength of the early model, which combined face-to-face teaching methods with emerging digital technologies, has undergone a gradual change where local tutors are spending less time with students during lectures and in some cases, tutorials. The erosion of the students' time spent with members of the teaching staff diminishes the

first year student experience of university life and potentially cuts them off from the sorts of social learning so important to the development of academic capacities (James, 2000; Thomas, 2002; Leathwood & O'Connell, 2003). This may or may not affect enrolments or the number of graduates, but it raises questions about the quality of the higher education experience being offered at the regional campuses.

In the past few years some faculties administering degrees delivered via the multi-location blended model have begun to 'mainstream' programs so that they more closely resemble programs of study offered to students at the central campus. This move has involved extending subjects not specifically designed for a digitally enhanced distributed learning environment to the Access Centres and includes aligning multi-location blended learning tutorial sessions with those at the central campus. Although many of these changes have been justified for equity reasons – that students at an Access Centre should have the same university learning experience as their central campus colleagues – there is justifiable concern that by conflating equity and equality, these changes will, in fact, only result in further inequity and radically erode the pedagogical integrity of the multi-location blended model conceptualised at the outset of the project.

Clearly, learning on a small regional campus at a distance from the subject lecturer and in an environment reliant on multimedia digital technologies is *not* the same as learning in a more traditional large university environment. In light of the Bradley Report recommendations to widen access for students from equity groups, this move to 'mainstream' multi-location blended learning experience by ignoring its specificities represents a worrying trend away from the good practice principles recommended in the literature, towards a corporatised market version of higher education. In this climate, and despite the undoubted success of the multi-location blended learning model as it was initially conceptualised and implemented, its sustainability is in doubt. In part, this is due to the significantly higher numbers of undergraduate students who currently access higher education through the regional campus network; it is also due to changes in academic workloads and faculty policies governing multi-location blended teaching and learning. The problem for universities deploying models of this type is how to do so in ways that are cognisant of teaching and learning conditions specific to this particular higher education environment while remaining cost effective, and without compromising the overall integrity of degree programs.

In terms of educational and pedagogical integrity, current moves toward a reduction in face-to-face teaching times for Access Centre students constitutes a real threat to the effectiveness of the model deployed at these locations. As well as the pedagogical disadvantages inherent with reduced contact, equity issues emerge from these changes in terms of effective communication between students, tutors and subject coordinators. Unlike their central campus counterparts, regional students do not have the option to compensate for reduced face-to-face teaching time by instead communicating directly with subject coordinators.

To compound the pressures on the integrity of the multi-location blended learning model at the centre of this case study, changes to lecture delivery styles have the potential to further widen the communication chasm between central campus-based subject coordinators and regional students. Some faculties have changed the policy of remunerating tutors for attendance at videoconference lectures, a past practice that facilitated student engagement with the academic process as well as navigation of the technological constraints, particularly at a first-year level. This policy has resulted in dramatic declines in student attendance at these sessions. It is a consequence that also highlights the integral role of regional-based tutors as communication conduits between the teaching sites. These changes potentially present a threat to the cohesiveness of regional campus learning communities as lines of communication between teachers and students are eroded.

The value of having local tutors familiar with lecture content so that they can further facilitate learning when questions arise in tutorials cannot be overstated. Unlike students who are able to attend lectures in person at the central campus, regional students usually do not have the same opportunities to pose questions directly to the lecturer. Either technological impediments or ineffective facilitation of communication via the videoconference technology can prevent them from asking questions directly to the lecturer. When accessing lecture content is no longer part of the casual teaching contract, similar disadvantages can be associated with lectures delivered via audio files as students seek clarification of specific points, concepts or arguments in tutorial sessions. While multi-location blended learning models encourage student-centred learning, the good practice principles reviewed above clearly indicate that first year students require environments that facilitate their academic development into independent learning (James, 2000; Bowl, 2001; Lefoe et al., 2002a; Lefoe et al., 2002b; Leathwood & O'Connell, 2003).

### **Conclusion**

The policy changes described above undermine the strength of learning communities at regional sites, a key ingredient of the early success of the multi-location, blended model deployed by the University of Wollongong. Furthermore, changes to subject delivery and content whereby newly offered subjects are presented with little or no reference to the specificities of blended teaching and learning in multi-location environments are becoming commonplace. Disregarding the particularities of the multi-location blended teaching and learning context by delivering subjects designed for traditional centralised delivery, with only minor alterations that are aimed at information dissemination rather than effective learning, jeopardises the educational and pedagogical integrity of the regional network university study experience. While these issues can be in part attributed to a 'changing of the guard' over time, they are also due to an institutional disregard at managerial, administrative and policy levels for the good practice principles recommended in the literature. It might be argued that the model under review in this case study has been brought into crisis because it has been so successful. As student numbers have continued to increase and degree programs become more diverse, faculties involved in the project are presented with ever more complex decisions. For subject coordinators, multi-location delivery of their subject presents significant pressures for managing workloads. The specificities of tutoring in a multi-location blended environment have been elided, perhaps conveniently so, from policies governing teaching and learning.

If, as we suggested at the outset of this case study, multi-location blended learning environments represent a valuable component in university initiatives to widen access to higher education for those equity groups identified in the Bradley Report, then systemised critical reflection on how these environments have been devised and implemented to date seems warranted if the challenges posed by the model are to be met with integrity, in all of its guises. By examining past iterations of the multi-location blended model deployed at the University of Wollongong in 2000 and identifying both the ingredients necessary for success and the challenges faced, the process of reflection that comprises this case study will, we hope, assist in understanding the issues and dilemmas currently facing universities who elect to travel this path. For the University of Wollongong, the successes and challenges evident in the deployment of a multi-location blended model during the formative years of the SCEN must be clearly articulated, and these insights used to inform future policies and practices in a rapidly changing university study environment. This needs to occur if we are to ensure ongoing growth and strong learning communities in our regional centres for the future.

### **About the authors**

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