Students flourish and tutors wither

A study of participant experiences in a first-year online unit

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Contemporary higher education has been affected by policy pressures built around 'flexibility'. The policies of widening student participation and expanding flexible online delivery combine to provide the opportunity for a university education to students hitherto largely excluded. Flexible employment policies have increasingly placed university teaching into the hands of casual tutors without permanent academic positions. This article contextualises and outlines initial findings from a qualitative case study of a first year, online unit which is a representative microcosm of the teaching and learning conditions produced by these pressures. While the students in the study felt able to enter the academic community successfully and experience empowering and transformational learning, the tutors felt disempowered and devalued with little hope for a future in the academy.

Keywords: Online learning, higher education policy, non-traditional students, first-year, casualisation, sessional academics

Introduction

Flexibility is a key word in the contemporary higher education system in Australia. Flexible and diverse entry and exit points, as well as flexible forms of recognising learning, open up the possibility of attaining a university degree for students '…hitherto largely excluded from university attendance' (Birrell & Edwards, 2009, p. 8). Flexible modes of course delivery centring on online learning allow a further widening of access to university studies for students unable or unwilling to travel to and from campus (Norton, 2014), often due to location, employment and/or family commitments, or for medical reasons. An increase in university enrolments of 'non-traditional' students, particularly those classified as mature-age, regional or remote, low socio-economic status or with disabilities, has been one result. At the same time, government funding for higher education has been tightened and regulatory pressures have increased, requiring universities to adopt flexible workplace models (Percy & Beaumont, 2008).This has changed employment patterns at universities, with a decrease in permanent academic positions and a rise in the number of casual teaching staff, both in actual numbers and as a proportion of all teaching academics.

In 2010, the proportion of teaching only positions taken by casual staff was put at 86.5 per cent while 52 per cent of all university teaching was performed by casuals (National Tertiary Education Union, 2016). Australian higher education is therefore experiencing some of its most substantial growth in two groups which can be regarded as being on the periphery of the academy: non-traditional students and casual academic teachers. This article explores the literature on these trends, and contextualises and outlines findings from the initial stage of a case study into a first year, online unit,

pseudonymously named Academic Transition Unit or ATU100 for research purposes. This unit can be seen as a representative microcosm of the conditions produced by three major policy pressures centred on flexibility: the widening of student participation; the growth of flexible online delivery; and the casualisation of academic teaching. Using qualitative methods, the overall aim of the research is to develop an in-depth picture of how the participants in ATU100 experience contemporary higher education learning and teaching within the unit, and thus allow the effects of these pressures to become more apparent.

ATU100 is a compulsory first year unit focusing on academic conventions, offered online by a major Australian university through Open Universities Australia (OUA). The number of students studying degree courses fully online has grown significantly. According to Norton (2014), 18 per cent of all higher education students were studying off-campus in 2013. This does not include students studying via a mix of off-campus and on-campus units. The option of studying their degrees online through avenues such as OUA is taken up by students who have widely varying reasons for preferring this mode to studying on campus, creating an extremely diverse cohort. This increase in the number of online students has been accompanied by a corresponding growth in online university teaching, including the wide-ranging employment of casual academics as online tutors. This is in line with the trend towards the use of casual teaching academics across universities. The proportion of university teaching carried out by casual academics is variably put at between 21 per cent (Norton, 2014) and 53 per cent (Ryan *et al.*, 2011). This discrepancy reflects casual academics' secondary status (Ryan *et al.*, 2011) within the academy, with several universities being unable to provide accurate data on the number of casual academics they employ or the conditions of their employment (Coates *et al.*, 2009). In the case of ATU100, more than 90 per cent of the tutors are casuals.

The students and tutors involved in ATU100 represent two substantial groups who participate in a learning space on the edge of the academy created as a result of contemporary policy with its emphasis on flexibility. The literature points to major difficulties for both these groups.

From the literature

Challenges of online study

The growth in academic transition units such as ATU100 is largely due to the recognition that it can no longer be assumed that students entering university are equipped to succeed in their degrees. As stated by James (2010), '… universities must accept that one of their roles is to address shortfalls in schooling for some people' (p. 10). Findings by Cupitt and Golshan (2015) suggest that online study may form a de-facto equity pathway as students who are otherwise disadvantaged use online education as a gateway to university.

Such students are more likely to have a 'fragile self-belief" about their capacity to succeed in an academic environment (Yorke & Longden, 2004, p. 83), less sense of belonging or fitting in at university (Berger, 2000), and to be intimidated and overwhelmed by their first year (McInnes & James, 2004). Fully online students have the additional challenge of acquiring proficiency in navigating the online learning site, at the same time as they are developing academic competence (Bach *et al.*, 2007). In response to the needs of non-traditional students, most universities offer physical spaces on campus where students can find academic support but these are not generally accessible to online students, putting them at a further disadvantage (Muldoon & Wijyegewardene, 2012). While the literature paints an overall bleak picture of the multiple challenges facing online students who are new to university, personal determination and a love of learning appear to be elements that can lead to student success (Stone, 2008).

Perseverance and retention

It has been widely noted that the attrition levels in fully online courses are higher than in comparable courses in which students complete at least some of their studies on campus (Cupitt & Golshan, 2015). However, Nichols (2010) discusses the complexity surrounding the issue of online student retention and how it can be measured, as well as the fact that a certain level of attrition is normal.

Personal determination is a key element cited by successful online students (Nichols, 2010; Beck & Milligan, 2014). Cupitt and Golshan (2015) suggest that online students need more grit as well as greater institutional and peer support in order to overcome their greater challenges and achieve success. Also important to retention is a genuine excitement about the opportunity to participate in university study, which for many students is only possible through the online environment. Stone (2008) mentions a love of learning and the desire to continue, as well as feelings of independence, fulfilment, confidence and personal growth gained by mature-age students entering university via a non-traditional pathway. Mature-aged students are highly represented in ATU100.

The importance of the tutor for non-traditional, online students

The de-facto equity pathway created by online learning results in a high proportion of non-traditional students in units such as ATU100. The literature suggests an increased importance of the tutor's role in enabling institutions to respond effectively to these students' needs. James (2010) asserts that new forms of pedagogy are required as students who do not meet institutions' current perceptions of university-level ability enter the academic community. Yorke (2004) also mentions the need for radical changes in pedagogy in the context of mature-aged students, to provide the social element shown to be important in promoting retention (Tinto, 2007). Thus, the ability of the institution to design new pedagogies for non-traditional students, and of individual tutors to implement them are important concerns for retention. Individual tutors are also shown to have a crucial role to play in supporting the self-belief of non-traditional students and helping them to understand university expectations (Yorke, 2004; Yorke & Longden 2004; McInnis & James, 2004).

While the literature calls for a reflective, adaptable and innovative pedagogy to meet the needs of both non-traditional and online students, the prevalent use of casual teaching academics means that many online tutors are not given the opportunity to develop such attributes

In online learning environments, '…tutors… act as the human interface between the university and its students' (Quartermaine *et al.*, 2012, p. 66). The literature on online higher education emphasises teaching presence as being key to the quality of the student experience (Garrison *et al.*, 2010). 'The instructor does not become less important in e-learning…students experience the instructors' support and expertise as especially important…' (Paechter *et al.*, 2010, p. 228). Thus, pedagogical and technological innovations (Garrison, 2011) are involved in the response to the growth of flexible online delivery. Participation in online learning spaces is a complex phenomenon (Hratinski, 2008). Bach *et al.* (2007) emphasise the need for skilful and experienced facilitation of online learning, conceivably requiring time and the provision of quality professional learning to develop.

The casualisation of academic teaching

While the literature calls for a reflective, adaptable and innovative pedagogy to meet the needs of both non-traditional and online students, the prevalent use of casual teaching academics means that many online tutors are not given the opportunity to develop such attributes (Percy & Beaumont, 2008; Lazarsfeld-Jensen & Morgan, 2009; Brown *et al.*, 2010; Gottschalk & McEarchern, 2010). Thus, tutors in units such as ATU100 often strive to develop their pedagogical skills in their own time and in isolation. Brown *et al.* (2010) state that, 'unlike continuing or fixed-term staff, casual teaching staff are not paid to develop and maintain their knowledge-base, yet are expected to deploy it in the teaching process' (p. 172). Percy and Beaumont (2008) problematise '…taking action on the issue of casualisation only in terms of the provision of adequate training…' (p. 150). They argue for holistic professional formation that includes casual academics within the collegial communities at the universities where they are engaged.

Instead, casual academics too often become deskilled and marginalised on the 'tenuous periphery' of scholarly life (Brown *et al.*, 2010, p. 170) while uncertainty about ongoing employment and their reliance on prior relationships with unit coordinators for continuing work, create a sense of financial and personal vulnerability (Brown *et al.*, 2010; Gottschalk & McEachern, 2010; Lazarsfeld Jensen & Morgan, 2009). Despite these adverse conditions, 'the risk casualisation poses to the individual worker barely rates a mention in government and university policy and guidelines' (Percy & Beaumont, 2008, p. 147). Rather, discussions generally centre on the perceived risk that casualisation poses to the quality of teaching that students receive (Ryan *et al.*, 2011).

The relevance of ATU100

The two pressures of widening student participation and delivering flexible online learning create the need for academic transition units that are taught fully online. The third pressure of casualising academic teaching ensures that casual tutors are highly represented amongst teaching staff. ATU100 encapsulates the conditions which produced these three policy pressures in a bounded teaching and learning space providing a setting for investigating the type of experiences these conditions create for tutors and students. ATU100 is a large unit with the Open University versions regularly enrolling 500 to 600 students per study period. The majority of these students have been away from study for some time, and

these students generally enrol in ATU100 as the first unit towards their bachelor degree, which makes it an important gateway to a positive and successful university experience. Given the potential problems emphasised in the literature, the student experience could be expected to be difficult, if not overwhelming. Nevertheless, findings suggest that ATU100 is meeting its aims for students, which centre on equipping them for successful entry into the academic community. This also suggests that tutors are delivering the unit successfully.

The interviews

Methodology

As a qualitative/interpretivist case study focusing on ATU100, this research aims to capture the experience of the unit participants in dealing with the effects of the three major pressures outlined above, using constructive grounded theory for data analysis. Interpretivist research seeks to '…get into the head of the actor' (Schwandt, 2000, p. 192) in order to gain a deep understanding of their lived experience. However, Laverty (2003) cautions that this understanding is necessarily combined with subjective meanings brought by the researcher, as the act of interpreting is influenced by their socio-historically inherited traditions and personal experiences (Laverty, 2003).

In addition to my role as researcher, I have participated in ATU100 as a tutor, adding a subjective, insider lens. Constructive grounded theory acknowledges the place of researcher subjectivity (Charmaz, 2014) in constructing theory from data and moves away from the positivist view that theory is something external to be discovered. Engaging with early findings is an important element of emerging design, a pivotal grounded theory strategy whereby the researcher uses constant analysis of data to inform and design the subsequent research stages. Initial sampling addresses the initial research questions to start the process of establishing theoretical categories and refining the research design according to established sampling criteria (Charmaz, 2014).

The sample

This phase involved a sample of three tutors and three students who had participated in ATU100, selected with both ethical and theoretical concerns in mind. The three tutors were chosen because they were not tutoring this specific unit at the time the research was conducted. This was a response to the ethical concern of a possible conflict of interest between their participation in the research and their interaction with current ATU100 students and colleagues.

The students in the sample had completed the unit previously, and were chosen as a response to the theoretical evidence of the importance of personal determination and tutor support to perseverance in the online learning environment, as outlined above. All three students had expressed doubts to their tutor about their academic ability at an interim point in their study periods, but subsequently completed the unit successfully. The initial research stage has utilised in-depth interviews supported by statistical findings derived from larger external surveys. Findings have been grouped into the following emerging themes:

Online study is a gateway to university opportunities

The data provided by the students who formed the initial research sample paint a bright picture of the benefits to students provided by the policies of widening student participation and flexible online delivery. All three students were enthusiastic about the unit and the opportunity to study at university level, as comments from the interviews reveal. Student 1 (S1): 'I think it's an amazing unit.' Student 2 (S2): 'It's been wonderful for me.' Student 3 (S3): 'Yes, very happy. I really enjoyed the course.' It was specifically the opportunity to study a degree online that enabled these students access to the university experience, supporting the contention that online study acts as a de-facto equity pathway (Cupitt & Golshan, 2015).

S1 experiences health problems which make her intermittently house bound, S2 lives in a rural location, while S3 has been diagnosed with bipolar disorder which makes going to campus a stressful experience. In S3's own words, 'In spite of having greater stability, if I'd attempted to do a real-time course rather than an online course…I think the pressures probably would have been too much for me even at this point.' The flexibility of online study is also beneficial to these students. 'The online courses allow me to pace myself so as to minimise any disruption to my medical treatment' (S1). 'It is easier to fit around my life…so it was my only option.' (S2).

Technical and pedagogical problems are associated with online learning

The online learning experience was not without its problems. S2 mentioned being scared off by the technological aspect of studying online for some time before taking the plunge and enrolling. 'Technologically

I think it was a huge challenge, and the lack of self-confidence in that sense…'. S1 felt 'isolated and alone' as an online student at times, and frustrated with the asynchronous nature of the learning site. 'Waiting for answers is the most difficult aspect of studying online' (S1).

Tutors also found the practical use of technology for online teaching to be a challenge. In their interviews, there was a sense of being thrown in at the deep end, with little or ineffectual training. As tutor (T1) put it in her interview, 'I was just into this world...[where] I was expected to know what I was doing because I was the tutor of an online unit.' Tutor 2 (T2) also felt unprepared, 'I am reasonably technically proficient, I'm a bit of a geek, but I still struggled.' Tutor 3 (T3) mentioned that the pedagogical aspects of the online environment were challenging at first, 'When I first started I really just went in cold…It was difficult to know [what] should I spend time on…".

Online tutors have a heavier workload

The workload associated with online teaching and the expectation of being constantly available to students were other issues mentioned by the tutors, a finding that reflects other studies such as that undertaken by Tynan, Ryan and Lamont-Mills (2015). Despite having taught ATU100 face to face, T1 felt that she needed to start again from scratch when tutoring the unit online for the first time, '…because it was just so different… the hours I did for the hours I got paid would have been just daft.' T2 also felt that the hours she put into the unit were 'much, much more than I got paid for…' but mentioned '…it's the same for internal tutoring.' T1 felt that online students were 'more needy in terms of constant attention. Students get upset with you because you don't answer within the day…or the hour.' T3 also felt that online students were demanding, as '... students…got quite annoyed that they couldn't ring me and talk to me…' rather than communicating via email.

However, causal tutors, particularly those who teach online, are not given space on campus or access to university phone lines. Communicating to students by phone would necessitate handing out personal numbers, which tutors are reluctant to do. There is clearly frustration with the constraints of online learning being expressed on the students' part. Fielding this frustration adds to the tutors' workload, '…because you don't know how to answer 50 emails…how to stop the train' (T1). In contrast, the students made no mention of a heavier workload associated with online study.

Students feel part of a learning community

Despite the drawbacks students associated with studying online, none of the students felt that these were significant impediments to their studies. In fact, there were aspects of the online learning experience that they particularly enjoyed, and all found it possible to feel part of a learning community. Due to having a mental illness, one of the reasons behind S3's choice of online study was the desire to avoid studying in groups of people. Despite this, being in the learning community provided by the unit was something she found enjoyable, enriching and supportive. 'I found it an amazing group of people…There was a feeling of being in a safety net [because] there were these open-minded, sympathetic kind of people that were there to talk to if I needed it…' (S3).

Although S1 mentioned feeling isolated and alone during her interview, she also found that the real-time, interactive sessions offered at intervals during the study period were effective in creating a sense of community. 'It made me feel like I was actually part of a class rather than separate…It gave us a bit of camaraderie...' S2 found the engagement in the discussion area '…important because it enables you to feel part of the community' just as effectively as in a face-to-face classroom. 'You don't feel like you're isolated out in the bush somewhere battling with the Internet…there are actually people out there that you have …common ground with…'

There is certainly a sense of genuine connectedness with a learning community revealed through these comments. Students appreciated the richness provided by meeting and interacting with people who have diverse life experiences, through the common bond of studying ATU100.

Tutors face a complex learning space with minimal support

For the tutors, the diversity of the students was seen as challenging. The OUA cohort compared with on campus students clearly presents tutors with a wider range of people and situations to manage, some of which can be quite extreme. 'I had one [student] who was sleeping in her car, she'd been kicked out of her house, with two children…' (T3). There was a perceived lack of preparation in ways to manage the online, non-traditional cohort represented in the unit in comparison to on-campus students, and how to translate the teaching skills gained in the face to face classroom to the online environment. 'I would have loved some pre-training in the technical aspects, and the nature of the teaching…it is a separate thing but it is all meshed in together' (T1).

Formal opportunities to develop and reflect on the complex pedagogical aspects of their work seem to be completely lacking. Such opportunities would be welcomed, '…. because then I could actually feel that I was advancing my knowledge and my career…and getting acknowledged for it' (T1). Instead, there was '…maybe the odd coffee with the unit coordinator or the other tutors once in a while…but no formal avenue to discuss how it was all going' (T3). Tutors felt devalued by the lack of opportunities afforded to them to develop as university educators. 'The reluctance of the university system to invest in our futures and in professional development for us…reduces our ability to teach' (T2). Tutors did, however, appreciate the richness of experience brought by the diversity of the OUA cohort. 'It becomes more challenging to teach because you're dealing with more diverse backgrounds, levels, experiences…and… it is more rewarding because of the same things' (T1). 'They have so much more in their brains to bring to their education' (T2).

Tutors have an important supporting role

Even though tutors are dealing with complex challenges within the online learning space with little preparation and almost no professional development opportunities, they still put in long hours and strive to do their best for their students '…because you want to do a good job, that's what you do' (T1). Tutors found they needed to provide more emotional support and understanding to the OUA cohort. 'My support mostly consists of sending back emails that said,"Don't panic, remember to breathe", rather than,"This is how you do it"' (T2). T3 felt the need to be different things to different students as some "… need that continual support".

The students interviewed found tutor support important to their experience in the unit. Both S1 and S3 considered dropping out at points during the study period. 'There were certainly times when I considered quitting not only the unit but the entire degree' (S1). Amongst other things, '...personal emails to the tutor kept me going' (S1). S3 found intensive tutor guidance at the start of the unit helped her cope with the more self-directed learning expected towards the end of the study period. S2 also appreciated the accessibility of her tutor, who 'encouraged me beyond what I could imagine.'

Students' personal determination was important to completion of the unit

The three students of the initial sample all found the learning community and tutor support to be beneficial aspects of their experience in ATU100. A further crucial element for persevering in the unit was their own personal determination, or grit. S3 felt she could link the strength gained from dealing with a mental illness to persistence in the unit. 'I think it just gives you this inner determination or drive…to accomplish things.' For both S2 and S3, personal determination was a major driver that enabled them to complete the unit. 'Persistence and determination…You've got to want it' (S2).

"Despite doubts and challenges, the overall experience of the students interviewed in this initial research phase was one of empowerment."

Each student found the experience of completing the unit uplifting and empowering. Developing technological proficiency and coping with online learning, interacting with fellow students, discovering resilience and achieving success with challenging academic material, all combined to transform students' self-perceptions and their personal self-esteem, as well as how they see the world around them.

Transformational learning was achieved by students

In this way, it seems that transformational learning was achieved by the three students interviewed. According to Willans and Seary (2011), transformational learning occurs when students construct new meaning structures to make sense of their changing world and the changes within themselves. S1 valued the opportunity to '… challenge my preconceived ideas…[and] look through a different lens…at the world.' She found that the unit '… altered my perception of even who I am as an individual and where I fit within the social norms…' S3 also 'found the material really interesting…to be able to figure out my viewpoints on a lot of things I hadn't thought about in a while.'

S2 gained a new sense of self-confidence in her ability to articulate her ideas. 'I feel now I have something to say… I'm not just a housewife who is dated…I'm a different person now.' The students also experienced a great sense of personal achievement in completing the unit successfully. 'It was fantastic! It was a really good... confidence boost to get that mark' (S3). Despite doubts and challenges, the overall experience of the students interviewed in this initial research phase was one of empowerment.

Tutors are disempowered

This sense of empowerment and enhanced self-esteem was not an outcome shared by the tutors. In fact, the opposite seemed to be the case as tutors felt devalued and powerless across many aspects of their work. The tutors felt that the lack of opportunity to have a consistent presence on campus negatively impacted on both their teaching and their relationships with their colleagues within the academic community. 'You don't necessarily have the relationships with on campus people' (T3). Tutors' ongoing uncertainty about whether their work in the unit would continue seemed to have a strong effect on their emotional wellbeing: 'You feel really slapped in the face for that… I hate it' (T1); 'It doesn't really seem fair…I was hurt…' (T3), and their financial wellbeing: 'I don't have job security…so there's the financial consequence of not having secure employment' (T2).

This uncertainty seemed to create a strong feeling of powerless frustration. All three tutors felt that the allocation of work was based on a unit coordinator's arbitrary preferences rather than experience or merit. T1 felt her years of experience in both on-campus and online teaching was invisible to the university. 'You get more and more experience but you actually get no recognition for that at all.' If formal recognition of teaching excellence does occur, it seems to have no bearing on allocation of work, as T3's experience demonstrates: 'I've had an award for professionalism, I've also had the OUA tutor award, I've worked as a coordinator... Now [the unit] has gone through another revolution and a new unit coordinator... so I'm not being offered the work.' University teaching appears to operate '...informally on a system of patronage' (T2).

Building and maintaining relationships is vital. However, if unit coordinators move on or are replaced, the relationships vanish with them. The rewards of being a casual tutor appear to be limited to personal satisfaction for teaching well. As T1 says, 'I keep coming back because I actually enjoy teaching.' However, this type of satisfaction has its limits and all three tutors felt that there was no future for them in university teaching. As T2 noted, 'people move on... away from teaching. People leave academia.'

Statistical findings

Data from the Online Learner Engagement Survey 2014-2015 conducted by National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education (used with permission) and from the ATU100 online learning site suggest that the positive outcomes that emerged from the student interviews are reflective of the wider unit cohort. The three students interviewed fit with the primary demographic traits of the cohort, and their successful completion of the unit is widely shared by students who begin 'genuine participation' in the unit as defined below. A large survey of casual staff conducted in 2014 by Voice Project (used with permission) at the university which offers the unit confirms that the concerns expressed by the tutors who were interviewed are also widely shared.

The student cohort

Information and a link to the Online Learner Engagement Survey was posted on the unit's online sites across an eighteen-month period resulting in 126 responses from ATU100 students. The results show that the OUA version of the unit enrols a very different age group from the on-campus version where the majority of students are still school leavers. Of the respondents, students over the age of 25 accounted for 78 per cent of the cohort, with the largest numbers in the 30 to 49 age group. Three-quarters of respondents were female. All three students interviewed fit this demographic. The survey data also suggest the OUA course cohort contains a higher portion of students with other important commitments in life besides study, which also emerged from the interviews. Information on educational attainment support the idea that the OUA students have been away from study for some time.

In addition, 37 per cent of respondents indicated that they were the first in their family to study at university. These figures point to a large number of ATU100 students being initially unfamiliar with contemporary university level study. Further to this, 61 per cent of respondents indicated that they were mostly new to the subject of their degree, highlighting the importance of the transition phase provided by ATU100. The students interviewed had all been away from study for a number of years, and welcomed the transitional aspect of the unit. S1 was first in family and new to university study, S2 had completed a degree, but in a very different field, while S3 had twice attempted university study but had withdrawn.

Retention and attrition

The figures from the online learning site of one study period were analysed, and are closely representative of other study periods for ATU100 and indeed OUA in general. At first glance the attrition rate is alarming. For the study period in question, of all the students who enrolled in the unit, only 39 per cent completed, indicating a 61 per cent attrition rate. However, a closer look raises the question as to whether many of the enrolled students had any

real intention of participating. Seventeen per cent of the students never logged into Blackboard, while a further 30 per cent never submitted assignments. Thus, 47 per cent of enrolling students did not begin what could be considered as full participation in the unit. This may indicate that some students have different reasons for enrolling in the unit than a firm decision to undertake a degree.

Taking the remaining students, who attempted at least the first assignment, as the participating cohort, the rate of non-completion falls to 28 per cent. This supports the contention of Nichols that the complexity surrounding student retention must be taken into account when attempting to understand the online student experience. 'Difficulties arise in terms of who to count as having dropped out' (Nichols, 2010, p. 95). While the literature indicates significant challenges for non-traditional, online students, the statistics from the study period analysed suggest students were able to overcome these challenges and achieve success in the unit. The majority of students who demonstrated an intention to participate experienced success in this study period, reflective of the students who were interviewed.

Tutor dissatisfaction

The 2014 survey of casual staff conducted at the university which offers the unit reveals that the dissatisfaction expressed the tutors who participated in the research is common. The survey was conducted online and received 353 responses. Staff were asked to respond to a range of statements using a five-point Likert scale. Regarding reasons for choosing casual teaching, the highest agreement was given to a statement describing the satisfaction gained from helping students learn, which is reflective of interview responses.

In the overall survey, the two lowest rates of agreement were in the category of career opportunities, specifically the lack of a career path and of opportunities for permanent positions. Fairness and equity, pay and recognition, and workload and wellbeing, were the other categories which garnered very low rates of agreement, detailing a lack of consistency with how staff are managed, not being valued by the university, and a lack of commitment to staff wellbeing. These responses are entirely consistent with the concerns mentioned by the research participants.

Discussion

The three flexibility pressures which are highlighted by the unit: widening student participation, online delivery and casualisation of academic teaching, seem to have impacted the tutors in the study more negatively than the students. The literature suggests that non-traditional online students who are new to university face multiple challenges. Initial findings from the case study indicate that for some students these challenges can be successfully overcome. The fragile self-belief of students reported in the study by Yorke & Longden (2004) can be strengthened and transformed, as they successfully manage feelings of being intimidated and overwhelmed (McInnes & James, 2004) by their first university experience, and discover themselves to be capable of persevering and completing the unit to a high standard. The literature points out potential problems for non-traditional, online students in developing a sense of belonging to the university community (Berger, 2000). However, the students interviewed were able to share a sense of supportive camaraderie with their peers through the online learning site. Pedagogical challenges in meeting the needs of online and non-traditional students (James, 2010; Yorke, 2004) appear to have been met successfully within the unit, as students' comments showed high levels of satisfaction with the unit content, as well as the support offered by their tutors. The statistics from a typical study period indicate that a good proportion of participating students can be successful in the unit, which may indicate that the experience of the students who were interviewed is more widely shared.

Given the greater complexities afforded by units such as ATU100, and the lack of opportunities given to casual tutors to develop their professional skills in response, it appears that tutors are donating significant amounts of their own time to achieve a quality experience for their students. This suggests that personal goodwill rather than institutional strategy is being used to ensure the quality of teaching provided by casual tutors. However, this brings significant personal cost to the individual tutors as revealed through the interviews above. Concerns about poor working conditions for casual academic teachers are expressed repeatedly in the literature (Brown *et al.*, 2010; Gottschalk & McEachern, 2010; Lazarsfeld Jensen & Morgan, 2009; Junor, 2003), yet clearly persist for the tutors who were interviewed. As a result, tutors felt isolated and devalued and saw little hope for their future in academia.

Conclusion

ATU100 is a unit in which the effects of contemporary higher education policies centring on flexibility in teaching and learning are revealed. While the sample

investigated here is very small, given the comparisons with wider surveys, these finding are likely to reflect more general, student and staff attitudes. For students, policies of widening student participation and online access to university study have facilitated successful entry into the academic community and allowed them to experience transformational learning. Theoretical sampling through the case study's subsequent stages will need to focus on more diverse student experience in an attempt to understand why students enrol but do not participate in the unit, or start participation but do not complete. The extent to which the positive results expressed by the three students in this initial research stage are shared by other successful students in the unit also needs further investigation.

Workplace flexibility does not seem to have negatively affected the quality of teaching in ATU100, but has had a negative effect on the quality of the professional experience for the three tutors interviewed, as well as on their personal self-esteem and optimism for the future. Again, it will be important to ascertain how widely this experience is shared by other tutors in the unit, and colleagues in similar employment situations. While it seems clear that contemporary employment practices at universities have a deep impact on casual teaching academics, the extent to which permanent academic staff and those on short term contracts are affected also needs to be considered.

Further in-depth interviews for all the participants in the initial research phase will be important, as consistent with the constructive grounded theory method. For the students, these interviews should show whether their experience in ATU100 has consolidated into continuing successful university study, and for the tutors, they may reveal whether they have persevered with university teaching or taken their expertise to different fields of employment. For both these groups, the ongoing effects of the policies which create the peripheral space they occupy may then be further brought to light.

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