

Off-Campus Orientation Vodcast Project

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The Monash University Off-Campus Orientation Vodcast Project was developed by the Off Campus Learning Centre and Health Wellbeing and Development in 2009 and initiated in 2010. The project aimed to provide off-campus students with tailored orientation information in an accessible and entertaining manner. The proposed nuts and bolts session will describe how the project developed and production processes involved. A highlight clip of the five vodcasts will be aired and there will be opportunity for feedback, discussion and questions.

Introduction

With the advent of the Bradley Review of Australian Higher Education (DEEWR, 2009), the Australian Federal government has committed to improving the performance, quality and reach of higher education to Australian citizens. According to Williams, Paprock and Covington (1999), open and distance learning, “offers the promise of developing new ways to address learning needs” (p.17). In fact, off-campus learning offers convenient access to undergraduate courses and can play a significant role in raising the numbers of Australians achieving Bachelor qualifications. However, careful attention needs to be given to the support mechanisms provided to those students who choose to study off-campus, in an effort to ensure successful completion of study. There is an increasing awareness that effective support to off-campus students will improve retention rates and as Thompson and Shillington remind us “the human face of the university has never been more important than it is now” (2008, p.534). This paper will concentrate specifically on the very early support mechanism of student orientation and provide one suggestion as to how it might be improved for the off-campus student cohort.

Orientation is an established part of the student life cycle and university calendar. At Monash University, the aims of orientation activities are to enable students to get settled into the university environment; connected to staff, fellow students, services, email and IT; and equipped for their studies with all the right resources. On-campus students are required to attend campus and faculty programs and are invited to participate in extra curricular or social activities, including tours, library classes, Student Association carnivals and parties.

Off-campus students generally do not have the same orientation opportunities as on-campus students. Consequently, they may not receive the same information as their on-campus counterparts such as an introduction to the Monash community; how to access campus support services or hints and tips for successful study. While this information is usually provided online or in written format (ie, in unit guides), there appears to be no single repository of off-campus orientation information.

In an attempt to provide off-campus students with an accessible university orientation program, the Off-Campus Learning Centre (OCLC) and Health Wellbeing and Development (HWD), in association with Radio Monash, joined forces in 2009 to develop and produce a comprehensive orientation resource for this important student cohort.

Understanding the needs of the off-campus cohort

Monash University provides flexible learning options for students, including the option for students to study entirely off-campus. At Monash, off-campus students make up approximately 12% of the student community. This mode of study is particularly attractive to students from regional or remote areas across Australia and for students currently living overseas.

Off-campus students have different needs to on-campus students; for example, they may not necessarily need to familiarise themselves with their campus but they do need to get to know the requirements of the school or department and of the university in which they are enrolled. They need to know about and understand the range of services that will be supporting them in their endeavours. Indeed, Melton (2002) reminds us that off-campus students require support systems “to help them overcome problems that they encounter during the course of their studies” (p.110). In addition, the lifestyle and environment of the off-campus student may also differ from that of their on-campus peers as they are most likely juggling their study with other responsibilities including work and family, (Qureshi & Antosz, 2002).

In order to succeed at off-campus study, students must ideally be self-directed, self-sufficient and independent learners (Wallace, 1996). However these may be difficult skills to develop in isolation from your learning community. Students who study off-campus (and in isolation) are not seen or heard and so

they are easy to ignore and attract attention only when they explicitly ask for assistance or tender their work for assessment. (Sturges & Kennedy 2006, p.191).

In fact, in their state of isolation, off-campus students may not be aware of university-based online assistance or indeed any other university student service units with which they can interact.

Data suggests that the attrition rate for those students enrolled via distance mode is somewhat higher than for those studying on-campus (Ali & Leeds, 2009). There may be a number of reasons for this, including lack of engagement, lack of motivation, a feeling of isolation and non-connectedness to their university and hence, to their study.

The orientation needs of off-campus students have also been highlighted in Monash University student equity forums. These forums provide an avenue for feedback by students, on student experience matters. At one such forum, an off-campus student representative noted the disparity in orientation information provided to on and off-campus students and particularly mentioned the concerns of students who felt they had not been properly welcomed by the university or introduced to the services it provides. Additionally, the 2009 Monash University orientation survey provided feedback from many off-campus students

who stated that they would have appreciated receiving the same sort of orientation resources and information received by their on-campus peers. This valuable feedback contributed to our plan to develop of the Off-Campus Orientation Vodcast Project.

The vodcast project

“If teacher and students are not together in the same place or together at the same place ... it becomes necessary to introduce an artificial communications medium that will deliver information and also provide a channel for interaction between them” (Moore & Kearsley, 1996).

The Director of the Off-Campus Learning Centre met with the Manager of Student Experience Programs and the Coordinator of Transition and Retention from Health Wellbeing and Development (HWD) to consider how best to provide off-campus students with a consolidated orientation program. When discussing what information to cover, it became clear that there were many aspects of the off-campus experience that should be explored. Therefore the information would need to be presented in a manner that would be succinct and easily accessible to busy students. The Station Manager of Radio Monash was consulted for advice as to how to present the information, as he had broad experience in producing interesting and informative pod and vodcasts for various Monash entities. It was agreed that a series of vodcasts which would depict off-campus students progressing through the student lifecycle, should be developed. A collaborative working team was thus formed between the OCLC, HWD and Radio Monash.

The members of the Vodcast team met regularly to write scripts and plan the development and production of material which would become five, 10 minute pod/vodcasts. These vodcasts could be downloaded to mp3 players or accessed online. In an effort to enable listeners/viewers to relate to the information provided, we developed five characters that would share their orientation and ‘off-campus study journey’ with viewers and maintain continuity between each of the vodcasts. Monash staff, students and friends were cast as characters who represented realistic off-campus student profiles, including a stay-at-home mum; a middle-aged woman returning to study; a busy business executive; a young farmer in rural Australia; and a young woman travelling overseas. The episode content was split as follows:

- Episode 1: Introduction to Monash, introduction to the OCLC, enrolment, receiving unit material, gaining IT access, organising study space and time
- Episode 2: Starting your units, contacting your faculty and relevant services, introduction to library services, census date
- Episode 3: Preparing your assignments, library and learning skills information, residential school
- Episode 4: What to do when overwhelmed by study or personal issues, getting involved in the Monash community
- Episode 5: Preparing for exams, sitting exams, accessing results, re-enrolling or applying to graduate

The team was conscious of the sustainability factor, that is, the need to keep the information relevant and topical so that the vodcasts could be utilised for some time in the foreseeable future.

During the script development process, we were introduced to an online script writing tool which enabled effective collaboration between the team members. An animated narrator was created to provide flow and continuity between episodes and a brief overview and review of information contained in each vodcast was provided at the beginning and conclusion of each episode.

Staging the vodcasts

The first vodcast was posted online in time for Semester 1, 2010 Orientation with a view to rolling out the other episodes in the series throughout the semester. The vodcasts are hosted on the OCLC Off-Campus Connection website and will be promoted widely on Monash websites including Orientation; fyi – First Year Information; Faculty off-campus study pages; the Library; my.monash portal and Blackboard. They will also be advertised in off-campus student publications, newsletters and in off-campus unit study guides.

The OCLC Off-Campus Connection website provides students with an opportunity to leave feedback regarding the vodcasts. This information will be collected at the end of each semester and assessed with regard to whether the vodcasts are meeting orientation objectives and engaging the off-campus cohort.

The proposed “nuts and bolts” session

- The session will begin with a short presentation describing how the vodcasts were conceived and developed (8 minutes).
- We will air a highlight clip of the five vodcasts (5 minutes).
- We will raise a series of open discussion prompts:
 - Feedback on the vodcasts highlight reel (4 minutes)
 - Providing off-campus students with an orientation program/resources – can a vodcast series achieve our aims? (4 minutes)
 - Supporting the off-campus cohort and understanding their needs (4 minutes)
 - Maintaining off-campus students’ engagement in their studies and connecting them with the university community (4 minutes)
- Wrap-up (1 minute).

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