

New shores: Preliminary observations from a proof-of-concept project to define and design a student-centred approach to study mode selection

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Contemporary higher education providers require students to choose between on-campus, online, or hybrid ‘blended’ study modes. Education providers predetermine which study mode/s are available for each course. Even in ‘blended’ offerings, education providers pre-determine the mix of on-campus and online study activities all students must complete. This paper focusses on the multi-faceted challenges of defining, designing and trialling a new student-centric ‘StudyFlex’ mode of study at La Trobe University and the genesis and rationale behind that initiative. StudyFlex does away with predetermined bright line distinctions between online, blended and on-campus offerings and empowers students, within the context of a single course or subject offering, to self-select and adjust their preferred study mode pathway throughout their studies. Specifically, in this paper, the focus is on the curriculum design and development challenges of ensuring equivalent learning quality experiences for all students, whilst at the same time accommodating a multitude of bespoke student-selected study mode pathways within a single course or subject offering. As a primer for further research, the authors also flag the additional polycentric regulatory and administrative challenges posed by innovations such as the StudyFlex trial and the attempts to reach new student-centric shores which such initiatives represent.

Keywords: Student-centred; Digital learning; Innovation; Flexible study mode; Higher education

Familiar shores: Contemporary university modes of study

For contemporary university students, the higher education environment offers an array of study modes, including onshore or offshore/international, online or on-campus, or blends of various modalities. While this may seem commonplace, such a situation was only predicted at the end of the twentieth century (Blight, Davis & Olsen, 2000). In addition, education providers are increasingly offering students a choice of study mode for their selected course of study. To accommodate student choice and learning preferences, many institutes employ ‘blended learning’ as a mode of study, often oversimplified to signify a mix of both online and on-campus subject learning (Colasante & Hall-van den Elsen, 2017).

Despite these contemporary advances, a number of fundamental truths remain. Prime among these is the reality that education providers continue to determine which study mode options will be made available to students. Further, even when education providers offer a choice of study mode, students are typically required to select their preferred study mode at the same time they make their course or subject selections. Once committed to a particular study mode, students can face significant administrative challenges in changing their study mode preferences. Even in the context of an expansion of ‘blended’ study mode offerings, the education provider still typically predetermines the combination of on-campus and online study activities all students must complete.

The nomenclature of ‘blended learning’ is arguably more useful as a staff-facing identifier or change agent than for providing students with clear meaning. Indeed, there have been calls to abandon this terminology for over a decade given its inconsistent use and its lack of student focus (Oliver & Trigwell, 2005). Most pertinently, criticisms extend to an acknowledgement that terms such as ‘blended’ do not adequately reflect the normalcy of the mix of technology in other aspects of everyday life. Modern life is not simply compartmentalised into neatly pre-determined silos of online and face-to-face activities. Shifts in activity and preferences are increasingly seamless, spontaneous and expected. In education, technology that supports digitally enabled learning is eroding distinctions between traditional on-campus and distance education, while simultaneously university students’ daily lives are interwoven with technology which influences their learning expectations (Kirkwood, 2014).

While Oliver and Trigwell (2005) found fault in relation to the term blended learning, they also proffered that benefits of blended learning could be found when offering students variation in aspects of their learning experiences. Using the variation theory of learning, they explain that “for learning to occur, variation must be



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experienced by the learner”, such as variations in media but also variation in ways for students to think about or approach their study (p.22-23).

Nevertheless, educational terminology and practices tend to continue to push against this changing tide, perhaps informed by the reality of the need for education providers and practitioners to work within their means, even if this requires them to “constrain themselves with models of teaching and learning that are no longer sufficient or appropriate” (Kirkwood, 2014, p.217). Few hold visions to reimagine benefits for students in adopting new approaches (*ibid.*), or when opting for new approaches, many simply react to what others are doing (Watkins & Kaufman, 2007). In terms of the latter phenomenon, Watkins and Kaufman envision successful outcomes for institutions who undertake proactive change focused on adaptability, including creation of a future they and their community of students desire, as opposed to reacting to what others do (2007, p.371).

It is clear that new, student-centric thinking is required in this space, such as that flagged by Krause:

“We prefer ‘no-lines’; online, face-to-face, our students are not really seeing the line in between... Students say online doesn’t give us on-campus opportunities. It is not ‘either/or’, it’s ‘AND’.” – Professor Kerri-Lee Krause, Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Academic) La Trobe University, All Staff Briefing, Semester 1, Bundoora, 5-June-2018

Following, the ‘no-line’ direction signalled by Krause, this paper focusses on La Trobe University’s trial of a student-centred blended study approach nominally referred to in the trial as ‘StudyFlex’. In this currently underway proof of concept project, the curriculum design team was tasked with redeveloping several existing subjects to offer students a way to better meet their needs of flexibility in moving between on-campus and online study modes; to enable students to create their own personalised in-subject study pathways within the context of a single subject instance. This task has posed significant curriculum design and development challenges, which will be the subject of much of the balance of this paper. However, it is not without broadly relatable precedent. Most pertinently work carried out at Southern Cross University known as the ‘Converged Learning’ project. This work surfaced as a starting point for the StudyFlex trial project team and, accordingly, warrants elaboration from the outset.

Mapping the journey to new shores: The SCU ‘Converged Learning’ project

As detailed by Taylor and Newton (2013), another Australian university attempted to create “one single mode” by collapsing “divisions between external and internal enrolments” (p.55). Southern Cross University piloted a ‘converged delivery’ model involving 39 subjects across eight academic schools and over 3,000 students (although, at the time of writing, we have found no available evidence that the initiative was sustained beyond this large pilot project).

Feedback on the model as gathered from students involved in the SCU pilot identified the need for attention to:

- online subject navigation, including subject concept maps and guides on the alternative forms of learning;
- technological orientation, including basic detail and offering practice sessions using specific technology;
- teacher-to-student support; responsive, available, contactable, supportive; and
- student-to-student connectivity; clear mechanisms for how to contact other students.

The major barrier to the SCU project (Taylor & Newton, 2013) involved the Australian Government policy of funding three discrete modes only, internal, external, and multimode, and thus not permitting a ‘converged’ mode. An overall institutional barrier was that clarification was missing on what “converged delivery/blended learning/flexible learning means for students and staff” (Taylor & Newton, 2013, p.57).

These barriers provided the La Trobe team with some excellent starting points for the StudyFlex trial. First, it was recognised that creating StudyFlex as a new formal and distinct ‘mode’ alongside internal, external and multimode delivery was likely to cause confusion and administrative difficulty. Hence, StudyFlex has been envisaged from the outset as a distinctively student-centred reimagining of multimodal or ‘blended’ delivery. Second, in order to avert the internal barriers encountered by SCU insofar as ensuring a clear understanding of what StudyFlex might mean for students and staff, the trial was undertaken with the preliminary task of settling on a clear definition of StudyFlex and developing a series of clearly defined parameters or principles underpinning any StudyFlex offering. The following part of the paper outlines the approach taken to these preliminary tasks.

Essential equipment for the journey: Defining StudyFlex and its key principles

Defining StudyFlex

The StudyFlex team in seeking to define and develop StudyFlex principles were initially guided by the student-centric strategic aspirations of their university. These aspirations are relevantly and simply encapsulated in comments such as the following:

“I want students to feel that they are at the centre of everything we do” - Professor John Dewar, Vice-Chancellor La Trobe University, Media & Communication | La Trobe News 28 May 2018

Hence, in the broadest sense, for StudyFlex to empower students to self-direct their study mode preferences any definition and principles must ensure a pedagogical design which tests the limits of the capacity of the University to shift the choice of study mode offering to the student rather than the institution. This intent is driven not only by the University’s own agenda, but by similar governmental announcements such as the following by the Department of Education and Training:

“It was broadly accepted that a healthy institutional culture that embraces diversity and flexibility and puts the student first is a key factor in whether a student feels like they are supported and a valued member of the institutional community” (Dept. of Education and Training, 2017, p.21).

From this broadest of starting points, the StudyFlex trial team settled upon a simple working definition of StudyFlex for use during the proof of concept stage, with expectations of a university agreed definition to be finessed post proof of concept and before any larger formal pilot.

In a StudyFlex offering, all students are enrolled in a single subject or course offering. Once enrolled, students will be able to choose from week to week or topic to topic how they wish to study. They can choose completely online, or exchange some online activities with a degree of on-campus activity that suits them. Students can modify their choices on short notice.

Figure 1 below helps to simply illustrate the concept. Overall, the student experience is supported by a quality online subject design ‘spine’, utilising the subject LMS (learning management system). The design will provide core detail. This includes clear navigation and technical guidance, including plain English general and subject-specific technology guides and contact options for further assistance. It also provides full assessment detail, topic introductions, learning resources, additional materials, and interaction opportunities. Online social experiences include creating a sense of community and belonging in the subject, commencing with icebreaker activities, through to social constructivist learning opportunities via purposeful team learning activities.

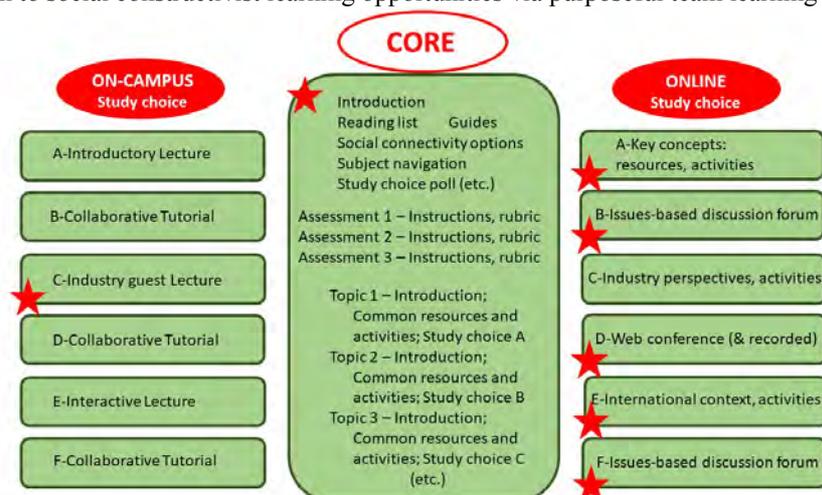


Figure 1: Simple presentation of the concept, where the fictional ‘Red Star’ student navigates her journey through the subject, in this case selecting more online learning experiences than on-campus.

Beyond the core online design, student choice points will provide well-signalled dichotomous pathways. Each pathway can be accessed by all students, with each student choosing their preferred pathway. On-campus options will include timetabling information and details of any preparation and post-attendance activities and/or

requirements. Each online option will comprise a complete topic package of resources and learning activities.

Core StudyFlex Principles

The core StudyFlex principles can be reduced to two fundamental concerns – (1) guaranteeing learning equivalence for all students; and (2) maximising student choice to accommodate the broadest possible range of student learning mode preferences.

Equivalence for all students

At its core, as alluded to in the working definition above, a StudyFlex subject comprises (1) a core online component that all students complete and use as their overall guidance across the semester, and (2) clear choice-points of components where students can create a personalised pathway by choosing either an on-campus or online option of an equivalent standard. Specifically, at each choice-point across a 12-week semester subject, all corresponding learning and assessment activities must be of equivalent standard including intended learning and effort required to successfully complete.

The success of any StudyFlex offering hinges on ensuring learning equivalence for all students. As MacKeogh and Fox (2009) have observed, while the rise of technological infrastructure enables multiple modes of delivery, including “flexible modular frameworks [and] innovative pedagogical approaches”, the most crucial requirement of such approaches is a “...commitment to equivalence of access for students on and off-campus” (p.149). This is a particular challenge for StudyFlex given the potentially large number of possible combinations and permutations of student-driven study mode choices which lie at the heart of the StudyFlex philosophy.

For definitional purposes, this paper refers to the term ‘equivalence’ as offering higher education student experiences that are equivalent in learning value via curriculum opportunities, despite access mode and as tailored to best suit specific access modes. That is, comparable learning opportunities are provided to students in distance and ‘home’ provisions when designing or reviewing courses, where-by one group of students is not disadvantaged compared to another as a result of the resources they do/do not have access to (Smith, 2010).

Maximum student choice and suitability

A StudyFlex offering must be capable of accommodating the study mode preferences of the broadest possible range of students. Hence StudyFlex offerings must include both online and on-campus learning experiences, where the students may complete the subject online, on-campus, or a personalised pathway of their choice including both elements. Consequently, StudyFlex offerings should not include compulsory on-campus attendance requirements and must include some on-campus activities for those willing and able to participate in those activities.

However, there are two further important dimensions to ensure the fullest possible commitment to this principle. First, synchronous activities should be avoided or kept to a minimum with an equivalent asynchronous option to ensure that students unable to attend (either on campus or online) at a particular time are not disadvantaged or precluded from study. Second, StudyFlex principles where adopted should be applied to entire courses (degrees). Whilst students may benefit from StudyFlex options being included in some of their subjects, there is little benefit for large numbers of students if these options are not available across their entire course.

To illustrate the point - many students choose to study via online or virtual study spaces to transcend geographical and timing constraints (Gibbins, Lidstone & Bruce, 2015). Many look for study solutions to fit with other life commitments and/or to meet preferences for flexible, networked learning over traditional lecture-styled classes (Oblinger, 2006). Obviously, such students would benefit little from a course which only accommodates their needs in some of their subjects, while requiring on-campus attendance for non-StudyFlex subjects required to complete their chosen course of study.

The journey so far: Conclusion and next steps

The StudyFlex trial potentially offers students a form of student-centric approach to selecting and personalising their study mode preferences. Much planning is yet required following the proof of concept of the StudyFlex mode, and prior to conducting a formal, wider university pilot for subject and course redesigns in this mode. There are still curriculum design and development issues to be resolved as highlighted in the proof of concept exercise to ensure this potential can be translated into reality. To aid refinement of the overall concept, a study has been designed in preparation for gathering student and teacher perspectives in the immediate post teaching and learning periods of each of the trial StudyFlex subjects.

The challenges are not confined to curriculum design and development. The issues raised in the SCU Converged Delivery project surrounding potential regulatory implications and ensuring clarity of vision and understanding of concepts such as StudyFlex are difficult to resolve and need to be fully addressed. Equally, there are substantial challenges in ensuring existing university systems can “provide all students with opportunities to make informed decisions about their enrolment and study options” (Taylor & Newton, 2013, p.58). Such challenges are ripe for closer study and consideration beyond the scope of this paper.

Nevertheless, the StudyFlex proposal is somewhat rare in being able to generate potential benefits for students, but equally for staff who can be freed from the challenges of delivering multiple offerings of the same course or subject to a fragmented student cohort, in order to accommodate different study preferences. Certainly, even at this preliminary stage of the StudyFlex trial there is much to merit continuing on this journey to the largely hitherto unexplored shores of student-centric multimodal course and subject delivery.

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