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# A Case Study of Online Support for International Students in a Doctoral Program

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*Online delivery methods that replicate aspects of face-to-face teaching and facilitate learning at a distance are becoming a more common teaching and learning approach in Australian universities teaching external international students. This paper examines a trial of a new online method of course delivery, using a CD-ROM as the basis of materials provision, communication and interaction, for a group of Thai doctoral students in a course at Flinders University in South Australia called Approaches to Research. The paper uses a case study approach and employs a focus group to collect data. The twin purposes of the paper are to describe the two methods of course delivery in which Approaches to Research is taught and to investigate the views of the Thai student group about the success of replicating face-to-face with online teaching. The findings of the paper, which are organised into themes, may provide pointers to university staff contemplating the use of online teaching to facilitate learning at a distance for international students.*

online delivery methods, international students, case study, focus groups

## INTRODUCTION

*Approaches to Research* is the first compulsory course in the Doctor of Education programme at Flinders University, with a regular intake of internal students. Concurrently with teaching this course internally in 2002, teaching staff trialled a new way of teaching with a group of students from Thailand. The Doctor of Education is a professional doctorate designed to meet the needs of leaders in educational institutions and associated organizations, who wish to pursue studies at the doctoral level that are based on research but where the principal orientation is not only about the development of new knowledge but also the application of that knowledge in professional practice (Flinders University, 2003).

This paper describes two delivery methods used for teaching the course *Approaches to Research*, the regular method adopted with internal students and the trial of online support for international students undertaking a doctoral research program externally. The main purpose is then to report the use of a case study using focus group data to investigate the views of the external Thai students regarding the online delivery method. The findings of the study are stated in the form of general guidelines that may be useful for other university staff contemplating online delivery for international students.

## DESCRIPTION OF THE TWO DELIVERY METHODS

The two delivery methods are described separately in this section as the internal student delivery method with its emphasis on face-to-face teaching, and the external student delivery method with its emphasis on online support resources.

# Internal student delivery method

A traditional face-to-face delivery method has been used in teaching *Approaches to Research* since its inception in 1996. In 2002, the class of 12 internal[1] students living in Adelaide, attending a semester-length course of 13 weekly classes each of two and half hours, had the face-to-face teaching supplemented by the use of a CD-ROM containing a number of resources to support student learning. The CD-ROM included four main sections:

- Aims and Purposes, which includes sections entitled welcome, topic overview, aims and learning objectives, assessment requirements, details of textbooks, and topic schedule of weekly activities;

- Learning Modules, which includes seven course modules comprising the course content;

- Learning Resources, which includes notes on the reference texts; links to education departments, associations and organizations; a book-length glossary of terms in educational research; links to statistical sites and online tools such as online dictionaries and thesauri; sample research proposals; a selection of reports and theses; and links to the full contents of more than 80 scholarly, refereed electronic journals that may be freely accessed with an Internet connection; and

- An Index alphabetically linked to all content on the CD-ROM.

This CD-ROM resource, which replaced traditional paper-based class handouts, also contained a link to a bulletin board called a Forum and an email facility, which students could use when connected to the Internet to communicate with each other and the two lecturers asynchronously in the intervals between classes. For example, in the first week, internal students were required to post a message introducing themselves to their classmates. The CD-ROM was linked to the School of Education's Intranet so that "the student who is at a workstation linked to the Internet and with the course CD-ROM in the drive, can seamlessly navigate between the two sets of materials [CD-ROM and Internet]"(Anderson and Askov, 2001, p. 156).

The two texts used for the course were Cohen and Manion (2000) *Research Methods in Education* and Anderson and Poole (2001) *Assignment and Thesis Writing*.

Assessment for the course included two major assignments, each of 3000 words and each worth 50 per cent of the final grade. The first assignment required students to select one of the research methods described in the Cohen and Manion (2000) textbook, describe the method and identify its strengths and weaknesses. Students were also required to illustrate the research method selected with a relevant research article, and prepare a PowerPoint for presentation in class. The second assignment, also involving a presentation and 3000-word written assignment, required students to prepare a proposal for a research study, which used an approach to research that was different from that selected in the first assignment and which was justified for the particular study. The proposal needed to contain traditional

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[1] Internal students are defined as those students who study using a fully face-to-face mode on campus.

elements of a research proposal such as research questions, an explanation of the importance of the study, and a discussion of limitations and ethical considerations.

## External student delivery method

The trial delivery method, noted at the start of this paper, had similarities to the above description of the *Approaches to Research* course with modifications for the fact that a second group of nine students enrolled in this course resided in Thailand. It was intended that the trial for these external[2] Thai students would replicate the experiences of the internal face-to-face class. The two staff teaching the course travelled to Nakhon Sawan Rajabhat, Thailand, to offer an intensive six-day period of face-to-face classroom activities, which paralleled the first half of the 13-week face-to-face class and first assignment requirements described above. Students completed the first assignment presentation requirements in that week and subsequently produced their 3000-word written assignment, mostly submitting these assignments after their arrival in Australia some two months later. These students also had the benefit of the CD-ROM materials and the Forum and email. Towards the end of the first part of the internal students' semester, the Thai students visited Australia and Flinders University for a period of approximately one month. In this time they attended two of the face-to-face classes held at Flinders and worked on the remainder of their *Approaches to Research* assessment, as well as attending other courses. They also gave a second presentation based upon the second assignment.

Thus, in summary, identical aspects of the course for the two student groups were:

- course content,

- textbooks,

- topic sequence,

- learning objectives and aims,

- course assessment requirements and standards (grades), and

- CD-ROM materials.

Course aspects that were different for the external Thai student group related to method of delivery and included:

- an intensive period of face-to-face time in Thailand (six days) and Australia (one month) for the external Thai students, compared to 13, two and a half hour face-to-face sessions spread over a semester for internal students;

- intensive periods for assessment presentations (all done in six days) for the external Thai students, compared to a more spread-out time for local internal students;

- more communication using the Forum for external Thai students and less face-to-face communication, compared to less online communication and more face-to-face communication for internal students; and

- more reliance on CD-ROM materials by the Thai students because of the gap between face-to-face lecturer contact.

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[2] External students are defined as those studying at a distance from the campus.

Thus both student groups experienced the twin aspects of course delivery and resources, including face-to-face contact and access to online materials, but it was essentially the different reliance on and continuity of face-to-face classes versus online materials that differentiated the two groups.

## CASE STUDY METHOD

The method used to determine the outcomes of the trial for Thai students can be broadly labelled as case study, which, in the broadest sense, can be either qualitative or quantitative depending on how research is conducted. This research study is best labelled as qualitative because the data were collected primarily through focus groups supported by limited participant observation by one of the authors in two classes.

Case studies are increasingly used when complex understandings of an issue or phenomenon are required. Case studies are a useful methodology when 'how' and 'why' questions are asked rather than 'what' questions. The reasons usually given for this preference is that 'how' and 'why' questions are more likely to be exploratory and thus suit the case study method. Yin (1994, p. 9) claimed that case studies have a distinct advantage when "a 'how' or 'why' question is being asked about a contemporary set of events over which the investigator has no or little control". Naumes and Naumes (1999, pp. 1-7) argue that case study writing is like telling a story about an institution or situation. The story has a theme or message with details that make it vivid and memorable, and good case studies, like good stories, are powerful in that they explain the world or teach us something. However, good case studies should also do more than just tell a story; they should present evidence for that story at key points of the study, and they should provide conclusions about the findings of that study.

Definitions of case study research abound in the literature and are almost as numerous as the writers of such research. Sturman (1997, p. 61) defines a case study as a "generic term for the investigation of an individual, group or phenomena", while Stenhouse (1985, p. 645) defines case study methods as involving the "collection and recording of data about a case or cases and the preparation of a report or the presentation of the case". Smith et al. (1990, p. 129) state that the case study method is "an approach to research which utilises ethnographic research methods to obtain and portray a 'rich' descriptive account of meanings and experiences of people in a identified social setting".

Bouma and Atkinson (1995, p. 110) note that in a case study "a single case (hence the name) is studied for a period of time and the results recorded". They go on to describe a case study as "one person, one group, one family, one classroom, and one town, one nation" in which "the aim is description". The present study is of this type in that a single cohort of international students is the focus: it represents what Yin (1994, pp. 39) called a 'unique' case, which is 'revelatory'. Further, the present study uses the educational case study method because it is concerned with understanding an educational intervention or action and it relates to what Stenhouse (1985, p. 646) called "the refinement of prudence through the systematic and reflective documentation of experience".

## Data collection using focus groups

The data for this case study of international students were collected using focus groups. Focus groups as a method of data collection in the field of education, particularly in the area of curriculum reform and evaluation, have been employed for many years although there has been a recent upsurge of interest in this strategy, particularly since the 1980s. Although often combined with other data collection strategies, it is not uncommon for researchers to use

focus groups as the sole data collection strategy. According to Morgan (1996, p. 130), focus groups are defined as "a research technique that collects data through group interaction on a topic determined by the researcher". Morgan identified three essential elements of focus groups: a research method devoted to data collection, interaction in group discussion as the data source, and the active participation by the researcher. Further, Morgan (1996, p.131) stated "typically that they consist of structured discussions among 6 to 10 homogeneous strangers in a formal setting".

All of Morgan's three essential elements were present in this study. However, focus groups were used in a particular way in this research. Only one focus group was held rather than what appears to be the norm of a series of focus groups. The reason for this approach was, first, the size of the target group (nine students) – it was felt to be beneficial for interactive purposes, as well as practical, for the students to be interviewed as a whole group rather than in a series of smaller groups. The second reason for a single focus group was availability of the participants. The course lecturers asked the students for their cooperation in attending the focus group at a predetermined day and time immediately prior to their timetabled class with the internal students but they did not themselves participate in the focus group.

A one-minute survey, included in Appendix 1, was conducted at the beginning of the focus group to obtain background details of the nine students. A standardised set of questions, included in Appendix 2, was developed as a basis for the focus group and to give it structure. The researcher acted as the moderator of the focus group. A two-hour time limit was imposed for the focus group, and hence it was necessary for the moderator to be quite directive with participants so that all questions could be addressed and to prevent conversation from wandering 'off track'. However, to allow for open-ended input, the final question invited students to add anything they desired, and the first question asked for a single word or phrase to describe their experiences in *Approaches to Research*.

Care was taken to avoid one limitation of focus groups, namely, the common tendency for one or more individuals to dominate conversation. A further limitation of the focus group was that the moderator was not a trained interviewer although she had some previous experience with conducting individual interviews.

Students were assured, both verbally at the beginning of the focus group, and in a written paragraph at the beginning of the one-minute survey that their responses would be anonymous and all discussions kept confidential. They were further assured that their responses would only be reported in aggregate to the course lecturers and that raw data would not be disclosed.

## Data analysis

The focus group session was videotaped and fully transcribed following the group session. Key answers were also recorded on large sized butcher paper (as per the instructions in italics for each question shown in Appendix 2) so that students could view their responses and respond to others. These data were then analysed for common themes, which were used to distil a series of broad lessons to be learned when developing further online courses, such as those for external students.

### RESULTS: FINDINGS AND THEMES

The one-minute survey revealed that the nine Thai students were all mature age students. The group consisted of four females and five males who, with one exception, were all aged over 40. Three of the males were also aged over 50. All nine students had Master's level qualifications. They all worked as English teachers at various Thai universities and two

students reported being Head of the Foreign Language programs at their respective institutions. All nine students had workforce experience, with six of the nine students reporting they had been working for more than 10 years.

Four main themes emerged from the focus group discussion, two of which involved somewhat contradictory reports from the students. First, students were concerned with the difficulty of the course and often expressed the view that the content was 'hard to understand' and 'complicated'. In particular, they expressed concerns on many occasions with the technical terms in the textbook and CD-ROM and the need to consult dictionaries constantly in an attempt to understand the meanings of difficult words. The Cohen and Manion text (2000) seemed to be problematic as it is 'written for a native speaker'. A relevant comment from a male student was "We only understand the surface information but need to understand the whole content". English language difficulties were raised a number of times over the two-hour focus group. One student simply said, "There are language issues". To overcome this, another student commented, "We looked for Thai texts and books in research to help us. And that is better. But even Thai books have English texts". The students requested simplified textbooks on Research Methods as well as translation of terms and content into Thai to assist them with English difficulties. They also felt that having an online dictionary to explain difficult terms was helpful but having something like *dictionary.com*, which is specific to the terminology in *Approaches to Research,* would be ideal. However, despite the difficulties of studying in English, students were keen to use English. One commented, "It is very good to study in English. I am an English teacher so it is good practice for English"; and another "It is difficult to express ourselves in English. To have ideas in English. But listening and speaking in English is good".

Apart from some mention of technical issues when there were problems with modem connections and sending assignments electronically, a second theme to emerge for the Thai student group was the difficulty of the course and associated assessment concerns. At the same time that they expressed this concern, the students agreed that the content was what they needed in this type of course: it was 'informative' and provided them with the required knowledge. They felt that the content supplied them with a 'good international education' and the research topics were appropriate. A relevant comment from a male student that echoed the first theme was "The content is good but it's hard for us to read"; and another from a female student was "We are not sure we understand correctly so we need high concentration and get very tired. But it is good". These contradictions around this theme may be summed up by the comment that "It enriches but it is difficult".

A third theme emerged around student-centred learning. The group expressed delight over the student-centred approach, which one student described as 'self-study', although conversely they often expressed thoughts about needing more lecturer input. One student commented, "We feel we have been thrown in the deep end". They felt more assistance was needed with understanding vocabulary and jargon, especially the statistical terms used in the textbook, and more assistance with academic writing skills. One student commented, "We need more help with the jargon and statistical terms" and another "the text should be simplified" and should "reflect Thai culture". They wanted the lecturers to spend more time explaining the assignments and using the online articles to point out how these articles were examples of particular research methods. The link between the research method and the article (presumably for the first assignment) did not seem clear to them.

Although the Thai students were very supportive of the lecturers' approach, often describing them as 'kind, helpful and friendly', they were concerned about the lack of one-to-one support and considered that the lecturers did not have enough time to spend in replying to emails and responding to their queries. The lecturers were considered as one of the three

best aspects of the course. On the other hand, when asked about recommended changes, the group wanted the lecturers to understand student problems better and to seek feedback from students about these difficulties. They wanted more of the lecturers' time for email and face-to-face instruction as they felt they had to compete with the many other demands on lecturers' time and with many other students who also wanted lecturer input.

A fourth theme emerged around group work. The group work aspects of the course always led to favourable responses and was raised a number of times. Students felt that informal interaction with their own student group and with the internal Australian students was a very important part of their learning. They liked being able to support and encourage each other including to 'give comfort' and 'cheer each other up' when difficulties arose, and to share computers and equipment. They also appreciated the social activities that accompanied their formal learning. Students liked the CD-ROM resource materials, particularly the easy availability of links to online articles in international journals via the Internet. They expressed little frustration with computing difficulties because they either supported each other, including borrowing computers from each other, or used technicians at their respective universities to assist them. A male student commented "Sometimes we phoned each other for help", and a female added "The people in our universities (who do have the skills) helped us when it wouldn't work".

The different emphasis on online versus face-to-face teaching was strangely not identified by students as being different to fully face-to-face previous courses they had studied (apart from the time spent studying in Australia). Students liked the CD-ROM and especially access to online articles (and the fact they were 'free') but they did not identify this as online teaching or learning which was different to their previous learning experiences. Indeed, the differences they noted mainly pertained to studying in English, team teaching by Australian teachers, working in groups, the student-centred approach and being encouraged to express opinions, submitting assignments electronically, the difficulty of the course, and presenting using PowerPoint. They also remarked that there was more reading and more assessment in this course than in others they had studied. One student commented, "There is more analysis. We have to not only understand but analyse what we have learnt. Much more thinking". Another commented "You have to think harder in this one. Have to concentrate". The practical and financial aspects of travelling and studying in Australia also featured in this discussion. Some students expressed the desire to have more money and more time to spend in Australia.

Interestingly, the group defined the face-to-face aspects of the teaching method and assessment requirements as similar to what they had experienced in the past. They also identified the following as similar: content, background needed, class activities and discussion, and time allocated.

In summary, eight of the nine students felt that *Approaches to Research* provided them with a high quality course. Two students had studied in other countries including the United Kingdom, and one of those students felt that these previous experiences provided a higher quality experience than did his experiences in *Approaches to Research*. This student felt there were too many limitations including a lack of time and continuity, problems with language proficiency and the high student teacher ratio.

In conclusion, the overriding issue that emerged from the focus group discussion is that good teaching is good teaching no matter how it is facilitated. The research points to the fact that students do not notice online teaching as markedly different to face-to-face as long as the technology works and it is done well (as was noted to be the case in *Approaches to Research*). Online teaching can be seamlessly combined with face-to-face methods with

little noticeable impact on students. The important difference to these overseas students was not online versus face-to-face study, or the use of CD-ROM technology, as envisaged at the beginning of the study, but rather the difficulty of studying in English and the student-centred approach, which is used as a matter of course in most Australian universities. This approach appeared to be quite different to the more passive, instructional teacher-centred learning that they were used to in Thailand where teachers transmitted the knowledge to learners.

## LESSONS LEARNED

A large and growing part of the role of academics in Australian universities involves working in an online environment to provide learning experiences for local students (called internal students in this study) but also for those students who are distant from local home campuses, either across Australia or internationally (called external students in this study). Clearly the trial described in this paper has considerable relevance for that role. Lessons learned from this trial may help in informing online teaching at the other Australian universities.

From the experience of using the focus group research method to gauge the views of the external Thai students, the following lessons were drawn.

- Considerable attention to student support is essential in online teaching as it is with face-to-face methods.

- Overseas student issues with English language need considerable thought, careful planning and care in providing support regardless of the teaching approach used.

- Cultural factors, especially those that impact on student expectations and different approaches to learning, are more significant to students than the methods chosen.

- Online technology and the development of associated teaching methods appear to be more significant to teachers than to learners.

- Facilitating group work and interaction among online learners and educators is important.

- Mixing face-to-face methods with online support and resource materials is helpful for student learning.

Given the extensive levels of support provided in this course to the external student group, it was somewhat surprising that they reported the need for even more assistance. However, in the light of difficulties of learning in another language, and their first experience of different teaching methods (mainly the student-centred approach), perhaps it could be expected. The fact that these students were all English teachers and thus used to using English to some extent, and of mature age with extensive study backgrounds, both factors which should give them an advantage in advanced courses of study, the case for extra support is easily made for other groups of less well credentialed students. Ways of providing extra support are not easily found, particularly within resource and time constraints, although providing more assistance with difficult terms through the use of online dictionaries may be one possibility. A second possibility is to spend more time with students, either online or face-to-face in supporting them with difficulties regarding assessment. Working through possible ways of completing the assessment and providing model assignments would make the requirements clearer for students. Providing opportunities for online and face-to-face group activities, both formal and informal, is also another priority. The reported need for this intensive level

of support points to the necessity to transition students from their previous learning environment to the new one.

## CONCLUSION

The lessons learned, although expressed as separate points above, are interrelated. In general, overseas students have high expectations of the learning environment and level of lecturer support provided by Australian institutions. It is important that lecturers consult students about their learning needs and understand those needs, especially when learning is conducted in a second language, and attempt to meet those needs where possible. However, cultural and financial factors, and the complication of learning in a second language, often mean that overseas students expect levels of support beyond the resource levels of many Australian universities. Balancing the task of managing those expectations, while providing a supportive learning environment, which gives overseas students a good chance of succeeding but does not lower standards, is a challenging task indeed.

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**APPENDIX 1: ONE-MINUTE SURVEY**

# Background

Notice that no names are included in this one-minute survey as its sole purpose is to gather some background data on you, the Thai student group. No one will be identified individually, either in this survey or in the focus groups. All information provided is confidential and will only be viewed by me and the person who transcribes the data. The course coordinators will not see any of the raw data and will only receive a report based upon the aggregation of these findings at the completion of the course.

Please complete the following details:

1. Gender – male/female (circle one)

2. Age – please select (circle one) the correct category for your age
   - 20-30 years
   - 30-40 years
   - 40-50 years
   - 50-60 years

3. Educational background (circle those relevant to you)
   - do you have a degree
   - do you have an honours qualification?
   - do you have a masters qualification?
   - do you have a doctoral qualification?

4. Please briefly describe your role in the workplace

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5. How many years have you been in the workforce (circle one)?
   - None
   - 1-5 years
   - 6-10 years
   - more than 10 years

Thank you for your cooperation.

**APPENDIX 2: FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS**

1. Describe, in a single word or phrase, your experiences in studying *Approaches to Research* at Flinders University *(list on butcher paper)*.

2. What is different or new about the way *Approaches to Research* is taught compared to other courses you have studied? (*list on butcher paper*).

3. What is the similar about the way in which *Approaches to Research* is taught compared to other courses you have studied? (*list on butcher paper*).

4. What works well?
   - Of the differences? *(one star next to the item on the butcher paper)*
   - Of the similarities? *(one star next to the item on the butcher paper)*

5. What needs improvement?
   - Of the differences? *(two stars next to the item on the butcher paper)*
   - Of the similarities? *(two stars next to the item on the butcher paper)*

6. What have you liked/disliked about the following? *(table on butcher paper)*.
   - One month spent face-to-face in Australia – teaching and assessment
   - Six days spent face-to-face in Thailand – teaching and assessment
   - Bulletin board (Forum) and email communication
   - Other CD-ROM materials

7. What have you liked/disliked about the following? *(table on butcher paper)*.
   - Course content
   - Topic sequence
   - Learning objectives/aims
   - Assessment requirements
   - Textbooks

8. How important to your learning in *Approaches to Research* was help with using the technology (CD-ROM and email)? (*add answers to butcher paper)*.

9. How important to your learning in *Approaches to Research* was the interaction with others in this group and interaction with the other Australian students? (*add answers to butcher paper)*.

10. In your opinion and based upon previous experiences in other courses which are fully taught face-to-face, does the way in which *Approaches to Research* is taught produce what you would expect of a high quality course? Please explain. *(notes on butcher paper)*.

11. What were the best and worst aspects of your experiences in *Approaches to Research*? *(table on butcher paper)*.

12. Would you recommend any changes to this course? If so, what would you change? If not, why not? *(list on butcher paper)*.

13. Any other comments? *(list on butcher paper)*.