

## CAUTHE 2007 Conference

*Tourism: Past Achievements, Future Challenges***EXPLORING THE FLEXIBLE LEARNING PREFERENCES OF TOURISM AND HOSPITALITY MANAGEMENT STUDENTS**

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Flexible learning is emerging as a new education paradigm for responding to the demographic, economic, political and technological changes confronting university educators in Australia. Tourism and hospitality management programs are not immune to the flexible learning revolution, and indeed some educators have already embraced this concept. The purpose of this study is to examine tourism students' perceptions of the attractiveness of various flexible learning opportunities at a regional Australian university. The findings suggest that students are enthusiastic about the prospect for more flexibility and have strong preferences for structured approaches that provide 'real life' experiences and allow them to interact with educators, peers and future employers. Students are not enthusiastic about flexible learning approaches which impinge on their ability to work while studying.

**Keywords:** flexible, learning, delivery, online, generation Y

**INTRODUCTION**

The tertiary education sector in Australia has experienced great change over the last decade. These changes have largely been driven by economic, political and technological forces. In the economic and political spheres changes in government policy and funding models have produced a university sector which is more reliant on external sources of revenue. In addition, financial support such as government allowances for students has failed to keep pace with the growth in living costs and tuition fees. This has influenced the demand for university programs and services because students are increasingly confronted with the challenge of balancing work and study commitments. Both the supply and demand for educational programs have also been dramatically influenced by technological innovations such as video conferencing and online learning, as well as the learning preferences of different cohorts or generations of students.

Given these pressures it is not surprising that more attention is being paid to the notion of flexible learning in the discourse of tertiary institutions in Australia and overseas. Senior university administrators are increasingly viewing flexible learning as an opportunity to both attract and retain students. Freeman and Capper (1999) speculate that most Australian universities have identified flexible learning (or flexible delivery) among their strategic initiatives. Bigum & Rowan (2004) contend that the enthusiasm shown by some university Vice Chancellors for flexible learning is related to the potential for more effective and efficient education, coupled with possibilities for generating revenue from overseas fee-paying students. Whatever the supposed benefits, it would appear that flexible learning represents a paradigm shift in the provision of education. The traditional lecture-tutorial format is being abandoned in favour of more innovative and diverse approaches.

Tourism and hospitality management programs have not been immune to the flexible learning revolution. Yet it is not clear precisely what tourism management students think about the variety of new flexible learning opportunities available to them. This paper will examine the flexible learning preferences of tourism students in a regional Australian university. Particular emphasis is placed on exploring these preferences in the context of the current generation of students.

## **CONCEPTUALISING FLEXIBLE LEARNING**

The term 'flexible' is often coupled in higher education with words like 'teaching', 'delivery' and 'learning' (Bigum & Rowan, 2004). However, subtle differences exist between these phrases. This paper is concerned with flexible learning, which is viewed as a more holistic and encompassing term describing education which allows students to construct their own learning experiences within defined and supported parameters. From a student perspective, flexibility can be thought of as providing and supporting choice in learning style, pace, location, progression and access (Bradey & Milton, 2006). The term includes the notion of independence and self-directedness in learning and implies that students are personally and socially motivated to achieve and learn (Campbell, 2000; Smith, 2001; Collis and Moonen, 2001). Flexible learning is therefore not simply limited to delivery or teaching, but includes the broad range of learning opportunities that a student might access and control. A truly flexible learning approach is one where the student makes decisions about when, where and how they will undertake a course of study (Wade, 1994). From the educator's perspective, flexible learning provides an opportunity (and challenge) to adopt new methods of teaching that acknowledge diverse learning styles and provoke excitement and motivation.

Poindexter (2003, p.24) argues that although "individual innovations like collaborative learning, service learning or the use of technology in teaching are finding their way onto some campuses, a holistic approach that looks at teaching and learning strategies from an integrated perspective may offer the greatest impact". This holistic approach does not involve the adoption of only one innovation in isolation but uses multiple teaching and learning strategies and takes into account generational changes amongst students. It involves the development of interactive course materials that provide students with a genuine choice of learning pathways and methods, a range of multimedia content and opportunities to interact.

Flexible learning does not equate directly with approaches such as online learning, distance learning, e-learning, open learning or external study. Rather, these approaches are examples of the application of the principles of flexible learning. Within the tourism literature a number of authors have provided examples of these approaches to flexible learning and some of these contributions are discussed below.

Gilhesby (2005) reported on a multi-faceted 'just in time' approach to flexible learning, which included the variation of course content and assessment requirements based on the specific needs of individuals or groups. He concludes that while there were some drawbacks to this approach, it provided a number of opportunities for the changing educational landscape. In particular, Gilhesby (p.51) noted that "the prescription of a series of lectures in a rigid programme determined well in advance of delivery becomes inappropriate." The just-in-time concept has also been used to describe how internet technologies can provide students with first hand experience and knowledge by engaging with tourism and hospitality professionals (Cho and Smelzer, 2000).

Barron and Whitford (2004) utilised three methods of data collection to report on the implementation of several flexible learning approaches in an event management unit. The flexible learning approaches used included student delivered lectures, guest lectures and authentic and reflective assessment items. While students were positive about opportunities to gain "real world" experiences through guest lectures and authentic assessment tasks, some students were less enthusiastic about student delivered lectures. These students expressed concerns about a general lack of guidance and uneasiness about being taught by other students who were not experts in the field. The authors argue that students and educators perhaps need more time to become accustomed to the notion of an 'educator as a facilitator and resource' rather than a 'knowledge expert'.

While these research efforts are consistent with a more expansive view of flexible learning, by far the largest body of literature dealing with this topic has focussed on technology enhanced learning.

### **FLEXIBLE LEARNING AND TECHNOLOGY**

The value of technology in enhancing service encounters has received some attention in recent years (Bitner, Brown and Meuter, 2000). Bitner et al. (2000) suggest that technology can dramatically alter interpersonal encounters and in some instance may eliminate them altogether. Conversely, technology may also dramatically increase the number of encounters a customer has with an organisation and may result in more satisfied customers by fostering customisation, flexibility and 'spontaneous delight'. These observations have direct application to the current developments in higher education institutions. Many universities are now using web-based and technology mediated learning approaches to improve student learning. There is a strong link between technology enhanced learning and flexible learning, since most technology mediated learning environments intrinsically offer some flexibility in learning opportunities. The use of technologies such as the Internet overcomes time and space barriers and offers students flexibility to juggle the demands of work and other activities.

The literature related to online learning has expanded significantly in the last five years. Sigala (2002, p.29) notes that "the Internet is portrayed as an education delivery platform enabling students to receive and interact with educational materials and to engage with educators and peers in ways that previously may have been impossible." Tools such as emails, electronic discussion boards, gradebooks and quizzes provide a virtual learning community similar to a traditional classroom. It has also been claimed that tourism students have become increasingly interested and reliant on technology in the learning environment (Sigala and Christou, 2003).

A number of authors in the tourism and hospitality literature have written about online learning under the guise of virtual learning environments (VLE's). Haven and Botterill (2003) provided a useful evaluation of the motivations and barriers associated with developing and implementing VLE's in sport, leisure and tourism in the United Kingdom. In this study flexibility was explicitly identified as a benefit of VLE's for both staff and students. Building on this work, researchers have also explored the potential of using learning technologies to support student placements in tourism and hospitality (McGugan and Peacock, 2005). Another study, also from the United Kingdom, reported on the use of 'webquests' as an example of technology supported learning (Hassanien, 2006). Webquests are described as inquiry-oriented activities that help students to learn by gathering, analysing and evaluating information from websites nominated by the instructor. Findings of this research indicated that students felt that their learning was significantly enhanced through the use of webquests.

There is considerable debate about whether flexible learning, and online learning in particular, produces better learning outcomes. Much of the literature on flexible learning implies that it is inherently positive, since it provides students with more or better opportunities in which to learn (Bigum & Rowan, 2004). In an investigation of online business education, Smith and Rupp (2004) reported that students enrolled in online courses received higher grades than students in traditional classes. Similarly, Scheines, Leinhardt, Smith and Cho (2005) found that students who completed fully online lecture modules performed better than those who attended large traditional lectures in the same course. Several authors have reported that instant feedback and comprehension checks only available in online learning appear to contribute to student success (Maki and Maki, 2003; Scheines et al, 2005). While posing many new challenges, Smith and Ferguson (2002) also found that online learning is viewed as worthwhile by both students and educators. Maki and Maki (2003) point out that research favouring online delivery focussed on the pedagogy and design of the course, and not the computerised delivery or the technology itself.

Notwithstanding the positive reports of online learning, many researchers have found no differences in student outcomes between online and traditional delivery modes (Lowry and Flohr, 2004; Finlay, Desmet and Evans, 2004; Caywood and Duckett, 2003; Carey, 2001). In some cases, researchers have reported that online learning was substantially less effective than face-to-face methods (Anstine and Skidmore, 2005; Brown and Liedholm, 2002). It does seem that in some learning contexts students express a preference for more traditional didactic approaches and view technology as destructive to learning. In Australia, it has been found that students dislike infrequent classes because there is an expectation of formal weekly face-to-face sessions with the educator (Barron and Henderson, 2002). Internationally, researchers have reported that students resented that fact that they had to teach themselves and felt that they had not learned as much from self-directed learning (Lowry and Flohr, 2004; Benvenuto, 2002; Horton, 2001). Some studies have also indicated that when compared to face-to-face classes, students in online classes perceived a lower level of support from educators and had fewer peer interaction opportunities (Biggs, Simpson and Walker, 2006).

Barron and Whitford (2004) observe that flexible learning assumes students have the requisite study skills, practical skills and technology needed to complete such courses. The literature suggests that this assumption is not always accurate. Several researchers have found that most learners in the Australian context were teacher dependent and exhibited a need to clarify and seek reassurance in their learning (Samarawickrema, 2005; Smith 2000; Smith 2001). Samarawickrema (2005) suggested that this desire indicated uncertainty, low tolerance of risk and ambiguity. The same research also found that students (by their own admission) lacked the maturity and discipline necessary for self-directed learning. Similarly, Song, Singleton, Hill and Hwa Koh (2004) argue that the 'viability and veracity' of online learning is far from convincing. From a student perspective, they identified course design, motivation, time management, technical support and comfort with online technologies as key variables in determining the success of an online learning experience.

Some authors have explored the level acceptance for flexible approaches amongst different cultural groups. These studies typically report that some cultural groups show a greater predisposition to self-directed learning, and are thus better candidates for flexible learning than other groups (Samarawickrema, 2005; Smith and Smith, 1999). This has clear implications for Australian universities, which typically have a high proportion of international students. There is some indication that student attitudes may be shifting in favour of more self-directed approaches, but there are still some students who expect a traditional means of course delivery and assessment (Barron and Whitford, 2004). The challenge for educators is to develop flexible learning approaches that provide adequate support and structure, while gradually shifting from teacher-centred to student-centred learning.

Bailey and Morais (2004) contend that one of the fears associated with the implementation of technology mediated learning environments is that they will displace face-to-face interaction. There appears to be a strong consensus in the literature that flexible learning does not entail the elimination of all face-to-face learning. There is mounting evidence that a 'blended learning' approach which incorporates aspects of technology mediated environments and face-to-face learning is most desirable, particularly from a student perspective (Bruff, Dean and Nolan, 2005; Scheines et al, 2005). Haven and Botterill (2003) argue that technology mediated learning should not displace face-to-face interaction and educators need to find ways to integrate these approaches. Bailey and Morais (2004) also advocate a blended learning approach in which interaction amongst students and educators occurs both online and face-to-face and their research offers strong support for this approach. Further support for blended learning techniques can be found in the work of Dale and Lane (2004), who provide a set of principles for effectively engaging tourism students in online discussion forums. Chief among these is the need to integrate information from online discussion into face-to-face sessions.

## **CHANGING STUDENT CHARACTERISTICS**

Most undergraduate students now entering tertiary education in Australia belong to Generation Y and the preferences of this group of students are germane to the overall discussion of flexible learning. Generation Y have been variously described as the Millennials, the Internet Generation, the iGeneration, Echo Boomers, the Boomlet, Nexters, the Nintendo Generation and the Digital Generation. Much has been written about Generation Y and their preferences for teaching and learning. While there is some controversy in defining Generation Y, the term generally includes individuals born between 1982 and 2000 (Howe and Strauss, 2000).

When defining generations, demographers often refer to formative events as a demarcation tool because it is argued that generations are shaped by their childhood experiences. In this context, the formative years of Generation Y's have been shaped by events such as the spread of AIDS, the dismantling of apartheid in South Africa, the end of the Cold War and more recently the destruction of the twin towers, and the new threat of terrorism. However, the most enduring characteristic of the period between 1982 and 2000 is arguably the emergence of personal computing and the internet (at least in the developed world). Most Generation Y's spent at least part of their youth with a personal computer and internet access, and individuals actively use the Internet as a tool for socialisation.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to consider the full breadth of literature on Generation Y, or even the education literature in this area, but a few observations are relevant to the topic of flexible learning. Anecdotally, it would seem that the notion of flexible learning is well suited to the characteristics of Generation Y. Generation Y is frequently described as a technology savvy, multitasking generation. Students from this generation are goal oriented and have a strong sense of optimism. They have also been characterised as experiential, group-oriented, sociable, self-reliant and lifestyle driven (Sheahan, 2005a; Allen, 2003; Paul, 2001). This might suggest a cohort of students who are more comfortable with self-directed learning approaches, particularly if technology is involved. However, Strauss and Howe (2006) explain that Generation Y students have also been sheltered and 'hovered over' by 'helicopter parents' and are used to clear structure from adults. Self-directed online learning is therefore unlikely to be successful unless it is supported by highly structured learning activities and opportunities for interaction.

Given these observations, it is tempting to conclude that a variety of flexible learning approaches may appeal to Generation Y students. In fact, Raines (2002) confirms that Generation Y's want flexibility, because they engage in many activities, including work, study and extra curricular interests. This is supported by Krause, Hartley, James and McInnis (2005), who report that first year students in Australia are typically employed for 10-15 hours per week and tend to spend significantly less time on on-campus than they did ten years ago. Generation Y students lead multi-faceted lives and demand multi-sensory experiences and rich multi-media presentations (Sheanan, 2005b). They are likely to be responsive to 'just in time' teaching that offers instant gratification (Jonas-Dwyer and Pospisil, 2004; Sheanan, 2005b). It has been suggested that institutions can respond to Generation Y students by not only utilising emerging technologies but by providing creative flexible learning approaches, team-oriented activities and clear expectations and structure (Raines, 2002; Brown, 2000). While these characteristics describe a particular cohort of students, Sheahan (2005) observes that older students are increasingly following generation Y students by demanding the same levels of flexibility.

## **RESEARCH AIMS**

If the transition between traditional teaching and learning practices and emerging flexible learning approaches is to be successful, it is important to consider the views of the current student cohort to understand their preferences and perceptions. Various studies have reported on specific flexible learning approaches and techniques, but none have examined student

preferences for a variety of techniques. The purpose of this study is therefore to examine tourism and hospitality students' perceptions of the attractiveness of various flexible learning opportunities at a regional Australian university. This purpose is supported by the following specific aims:

- To understand the context for flexible learning preferences by exploring how much time tourism and hospitality students spend on work and study activities
- To examine general student perceptions of learning and flexibility
- To explore student preferences for specific flexible learning approaches
- To compare the flexible learning preferences of tourism and hospitality students with business and accounting students in order to highlight disciplinary variations

The research seeks to add to the literature on flexible learning by considering student preferences and attitudes toward a broad range of flexible approaches. The approaches evaluated by the research include technology enhanced learning contexts, flexible assessment, blended delivery techniques, opportunities for 'real world experiences' and variations in the pace and timing of courses. These items were identified from the various approaches described in the literature on flexible learning.

## **METHOD**

The data were collected using a self-completed questionnaire distributed to students in selected classes. The questionnaire was also deployed in an online format to capture students who may not have been in class. The in-class survey of tourism, business and accounting students was conducted on two campuses of a regional Australian university. While there are some examples of flexible learning techniques, the dominant teaching style at the university consisted of traditional face-to-face lectures and tutorials. The sampling method involved selecting classes across multiple campuses and year levels to ensure a good spread of students. Classes were also selected with a view to maximise the sample size.

The in-class and online versions of the survey included identical items. To facilitate coding and analysis most of the questions were closed-ended, although it is appreciated that this predominantly quantitative approach introduces some limitations. The questionnaire was divided into three sections: (1) work, family and university; (2) views about flexible learning; and (3) student profile. The first section explored how students use their time, the impact of paid work on university study, reasons for working and preferences for face-to-face learning. In order to explore how students used their time outside university they were asked how many hours per week were spent on course contact, web use (both for study and recreational purposes), private study, group work, course readings, library visits and paid work. This question was adapted from the work of Krause et al (2005) and provides a context for interpreting the flexible learning preferences and attitudes explored by subsequent questions.

The second section of the questionnaire asked students to firstly indicate their level of agreement with a number of statements related to flexible learning, online learning, time management and workload. These questions were also adapted from the work of Krause et al. (2005) and students were asked to record their response using a five point scale (1=strongly agree...5=strong disagree). To measure student preferences for various flexible learning approaches respondents were then asked to rate 25 items on a five-point scale from very appealing (1) to not at all appealing (5). These items included approaches that offered students flexibility in terms of learning styles, location, time, pace and assessment. For example, work placements and field trips offer students flexibility in terms of learning styles, while online learning offers flexibility in terms of location, time and pace. The approaches included face-to-face, text-based and technology enhanced learning options.

In the third section of the questionnaire students were asked to provide answers to a number of categorical questions including gender, enrolment mode (part time or full time), degree studied, whether they were from a non-English speaking background, whether they were from a rural or remote area and whether they were the first in their immediate family to attend university.

A total of 471 questionnaires were completed by students (including 58 online completions). Of these 193 (42%) were completed by business students, 133 (29%) by accounting students, 70 (15%) by tourism and hospitality students and 69 (15%) by students studying other degrees. Most of the results presented in this paper are concerned with the 70 tourism and hospitality students and a profile of this sample is presented in Table 1.

**Table 1**  
**Profile of tourism and hospitality respondents**

	Responses	Percentage
<i>Gender</i>		
Male	18	25.7
Female	52	74.3
<i>Age (mean = 20.8)</i>		
Below 19	34	48.6
20-24	27	38.6
Over 25	9	12.9
<i>Characteristics</i>		
Non-English speaking background	10	14.3
First in family to attend university	34	48.6
Rural or remote area	24	34.3
Caring for dependents	3	4.3
Working in paid employment	53	75.7
Enrolled full-time	67	95.7

The 70 students represent 30% of all tourism and hospitality enrolments at the university, indicating a reasonably robust sample. The distributions of gender and enrolment mode were also consistent with the overall population of tourism and hospitality students at the institution. Most of these students were born between 1986 and 1989, placing them at the centre of generation Y. The percentage of students indicating that they were in paid employment was slightly higher than the findings of other researchers reporting on the Australian context. Moscardo and Pearce (2007) found that 62% of tourism students in their study were in paid employment while a broader study of first year students in Australia reported that 66% of students were engaged in paid employment (Krause et al. (2005). In this study, the proportion of students engaged in paid employment in the broader sample (i.e. including business and accounting students) was 72.3%.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The focus of the first part of the analysis is to explore the relationship between work and study. This includes an assessment of how much time students spend on work and study, why students work and when students find it most convenient to attend face-to-face classes. The second part of the analysis focuses on student attitudes and preferences for flexible learning.

The first aim of this study was “to understand the context for flexible learning preferences by exploring how much time tourism and hospitality students spend on work and study activities.” Table 2 provides a summary of the amount of time spent by tourism and hospitality students on various activities.

**Table 2**  
**How tourism and hospitality students spend their time**

	None (%)	1-2 Hours (%)	3-5 Hours (%)	6-10 Hours (%)	11-16 Hours (%)	More (%)
Face-to-face course contact	1.4	4.3	11.6	43.5	37.7	1.4
Using the web for study		27.5	47.8	18.8	4.3	1.4
Using the web for recreation	7.1	32.9	27.1	20.0	8.6	4.3
Group work	12.9	34.3	42.9	8.6	1.4	
Private study		22.9	40.0	24.3	8.6	4.3
Course readings	11.6	47.8	26.1	13.0		1.4
Paid work	24.3	4.3	4.3	15.7	27.1	24.3
Using the library	25.7	31.4	24.3	8.6	4.3	5.7

Of the activities listed in Table 2, face-to-face contact and paid work consumed the most amount of time. It appears that for some students the amount of time spent working exceeded the amount of time devoted to course contact, with 24.3% of students reporting that they worked more than 16 hours per week. Overall the pattern of results regarding the time spent on paid work is consistent with the findings of Moscardo and Pearce (2007) but higher than the national figures reported by Krause et al. (2005). Tourism and hospitality students appeared to spend more time using the web for study and research than using the library.

Of the 75.5% of students engaged in paid employment while studying, more than two thirds (69.6%) believed that paid work interfered at least moderately with their academic performance, with 10.7% indicting it interferes severely and 58.9% indicating that it interfered moderately. It seems that the general acceptance that work does interfere with study was tempered by the fact that students derived a number of benefits from their employment. Table 3 summarises some of the reasons students were doing paid work.

**Table 3**  
**Reasons for doing paid work**

	Frequency	Percentage
To afford 'extras'	48	87.3
To meet basic needs	44	80.0
To be more financially independent	28	50.9
To improve my employability after I finish university	19	34.5
To gain work experience relevant to my course	18	32.7
To pay off current loans or debts	17	30.9
To save for paying off future HECS/FEE-HELP debts	16	29.1
To support my family	2	3.6

Most students were working in order to afford 'extras' or to meet basic needs such as food, electricity and accommodation. More than half of the students in the sample also worked because they wished to be financially independent. It should be noted that the institution attended by these students does have a higher proportion of students from low socio-economic backgrounds when compared to national averages. Paid employment appears to be a crucial factor in allowing students to stay at university given that four out of five students are working to meet basic needs. Students appear to be walking an increasingly fine line between devoting time to study and working in order to continue funding their university education. The results also imply that students are working to meet immediate needs, with only about 1/3 of students working for more strategic reasons, such as work experience, employability or debt relief. Given this reliance on work, it is useful to consider when it would be most convenient for students to attend university. Table 4 provides an overview of the most convenient times for attending university classes.



**Table 4**  
**Most convenient times for attending face-to-face sessions**

	Frequency	Percentage
Monday to Friday between 9am-1pm	35	53.8
Monday to Friday between 1pm-5pm	20	30.8
Monday to Friday after 5pm	1	1.5
Weekends between 9am-5pm	2	3.1
Shift worker so times vary	7	10.8
Total	65	100.0

More than half of the tourism and hospitality students in the sample (53.8%) indicated that classes held in the morning on weekdays would be most convenient. After hours classes were only nominated by one student, while weekend classes were not much more popular. Interestingly, seven students noted that it was difficult to nominate a most convenient time because of shift work schedules which varied. Many of the students at the university work in the tourism and hospitality industry and work hours are often in the evening and after hours. The results do raise the question of whether students plan their work around their study, or whether they plan their study around their work commitments. The latter has far greater implications for the delivery of flexible learning solutions.

Having established some of the context for the introduction of more flexible learning options, the following two tables explore student perceptions and attitudes toward flexible learning. These tables also compare the responses of tourism and hospitality students with those of business, accounting and other students. This comparison serves two functions. Firstly, it indicates that the overall pattern of results for tourism students is broadly consistent with the larger sample. Secondly, the comparison highlights some differences between tourism students and the allied areas of business and accounting. These differences are obvious areas for further exploration and discussion.

The second aim of the study was “to examine general student perceptions of learning and flexibility”, while the fourth aim was “to compare the flexible learning preferences of tourism and hospitality students with business and accounting students in order to highlight disciplinary variations.” Table 5 presents student attitudes toward flexible learning, online learning, time management and workload. Given the obvious and increasing challenges students face in balancing work and study, it is not surprising that most tourism students agreed that they would like more flexibility to help them learn (mean = 2.31). While tourism students generally agreed that online materials were sufficient for succeeding in most subjects (unlike other students), there was disagreement with the view that face-to-face classes could be missed as a result. This is a strong indication that students still value face-to-face contact. In particular, it appears that tourism students at the institution under investigation were particularly positive about lectures, whereas business and accounting students were more positive about tutorials. There are a range of factors that may account for this difference, including the teaching and learning approaches used by staff in these different areas. It is also clear from the results that students do not regularly read the prescribed readings for their classes. This has implications for some of the more student-directed approaches to flexible learning and supports the findings by some researchers that Australian university students lack the discipline for self-directed learning (Haven and Botterill, 2003; Samarawickrema, 2005; Smith 2000). Perhaps the results simply demonstrate that students are strategic in terms of time management and perceive that two hours spent earning an income delivers greater benefit than two hours spent on class readings.

**Table 5**  
**Student attitudes toward flexible learning, online learning, time management & workload**

	Study Area				Kruskal Wallis	
	Tourism n=70	Business n=193	Accounting n=133	Other n=69	Chi-Square	Sig.
I would like more flexibility to help me learn in my degree	2.31	2.23	2.21	2.49	5.71	.13
Lectures help me to understand my subjects better	2.06	2.42	2.41	2.20	9.26	.03
Tutorials help me to understand my subjects better	2.36	2.25	1.97	2.25	9.67	.02
I always do the prescribed readings for my classes	3.41	3.31	3.14	3.39	3.93	.27
I find it difficult to keep up with the amount of work in my degree	2.69	2.76	2.79	2.81	0.67	.88
I find it difficult to organise time for group work	2.74	2.61	2.59	2.62	0.71	.87
Lecturers make good use of the web to support my learning	2.19	2.39	2.27	2.46	3.62	.31
You can miss a lot of classes because most materials are online	3.27	3.25	3.70	3.68	18.61	.00
Online materials are sufficient for succeeding in most subjects	2.44	2.70	2.90	2.88	9.35	.03
My teachers understand the challenges students face in balancing work, family & study commitments	2.77	3.03	2.86	3.00	4.28	.23

Mean based on 1 = Strongly Agree...5 = Strongly Disagree

A series of comparisons were conducted to see whether any of the tourism student characteristics reported in Table 1 influenced their attitudes toward flexible learning. Generally few significant differences were identified (using  $p < 0.1$  as the cutoff), but the Mann-Whitney analysis did highlight the following distinctions:

- Students who were employed were significantly more likely to agree ( $p=0.099$ ;  $U=334.5$ ) with the statement “you can miss a lot of classes because most materials are online”. This implies that many employed students rely more heavily on online materials.
- Female students were significantly more likely to agree that they would like more flexibility ( $p=0.084$ ;  $U=347.0$ ) and that lectures helped them understand their subjects better ( $p=0.057$ ;  $U=336.0$ ). However, female students were also more likely to agree that online materials were sufficient for succeeding in most subjects ( $p=0.082$ ;  $U=346.5$ ). The reasons for these gender differences are not clear and perhaps need further exploration.
- Students from non-English speaking backgrounds (NESB) were significantly more likely to agree that they always do the prescribed readings ( $p=0.010$ ;  $U=154.5$ ). This indicates that NESB students are supplementing face-to-face classes with readings perhaps as a strategy for minimizing the risk of failure or misunderstanding.
- Surprisingly, students who were the first in their immediate family to attend university were less likely to experience difficulties in keeping up with the amount of work ( $p=0.79$ ;  $U=470.0$ ). These students were also significantly more likely to feel that lecturers were making good use of the web to support their learning ( $p=0.34$ ;  $U=438.5$ ). These findings are perplexing, but interesting if they can be confirmed by further research.

The third aim of the research was “to explore student preferences for specific flexible learning approaches.” Table 6 provides a summary of the appeal of various flexible learning approaches, while also allowing for a comparison of tourism, business and accounting students. A clear pattern in the results is that tourism students are enthusiastic about learning opportunities that

offer experiential, ‘real world’ experiences. Work placements, subjects that give students credit for skills learning in existing jobs and field trips rate highly in terms of appeal. This theme emerges consistently in the literature dealing with Generation Y, so the findings are perhaps not surprising. While all students found work placements appealing, tourism students were particularly enthusiastic about this option. There was also a significant difference between tourism students and other groups when rating the appeal of field trips. These findings are perhaps a due to the vocational nature of tourism and hospitality education.

**Table 6**  
**Student preferences for various flexible learning approaches**

	Study Area				Kruskal Wallis	
	Tourism n=70	Business n=193	Accounting n=133	Other n=69	Chi-Square	Sig.
Opportunities for work placements to develop my hands-on skills	1.67	2.14	1.97	1.83	10.38	.02
Subjects that give me recognition / credit for skills I learn while working	1.77	1.74	1.79	1.90	1.89	.60
A choice between different assessments in the one subject	1.91	1.99	2.01	1.88	1.98	.58
More subjects with field trips	2.01	2.71	3.08	2.57	33.03	.00
Subject options that allow me to fast track my degree (i.e. 2 years F/T)	2.16	1.94	2.03	1.97	2.74	.43
A combination of face-to-face and online learning	2.30	2.34	2.42	2.54	3.27	.35
More interaction in lectures / workshops / tutorials	2.37	2.51	2.41	2.35	2.59	.46
Videos of lectures to watch when I like	2.50	2.49	2.38	2.51	.68	.88
Online videos of lectures to watch when I like	2.51	2.33	2.26	2.32	1.92	.59
Subjects with lectures / tutorials in a mixed format	2.54	2.49	2.53	2.59	.60	.90
Subjects with a mix of normal and intensive block delivery	2.69	2.63	2.62	2.84	1.72	.63
Starting and finishing a subject when it suits me	2.73	2.55	2.76	2.38	5.87	.12
Intensive block subjects running daily over 1-2 weeks	2.73	2.57	2.66	2.70	1.02	.80
Face to face subjects with fewer tutorials / workshops	2.74	2.98	3.26	3.17	9.78	.02
Face to face subjects with fewer lectures (i.e. not every week)	2.80	2.72	3.02	2.96	5.86	.12
Lectures delivered as podcasts	3.04	3.12	3.33	3.39	3.79	.28
Video conference subjects on multiple campuses	3.10	3.03	3.29	3.28	4.34	.23
Intensive block subjects running over 4-5 weekends	3.14	2.84	2.57	3.17	11.00	.01
External / online subjects with no face to face classes	3.16	2.99	3.37	3.12	5.19	.16
A fully external/online degree with no face-to-face contact	3.56	3.48	3.83	3.67	5.07	.17
Textbook-based subject with no face-to-face contact	3.80	3.62	3.80	3.59	2.68	.44
After hours classes (anytime after 5pm)	3.89	3.41	3.35	3.86	11.42	.01
After hours classes (6-9pm)	4.07	3.61	3.58	4.06	10.20	.02
Saturday classes	4.26	3.99	4.05	4.39	4.04	.26
Sunday classes	4.34	4.09	4.17	4.55	8.01	.05

Mean based on 1 = Very appealing...5 = Not at all appealing

Tourism students were also very enthusiastic about subjects which offered them a choice of assessment items and opportunities to fast track their degree. These two items can be problematic for educators to implement. Offering a choice of assessment items increases the

potential for inequities between students. A choice of assessments also creates an opportunity for students to select assessments which will maximize their grades rather than those from which they stand to learn the most (Gilhesby, 2005). However, it is acknowledged that carefully designed assessment pieces with the same learning outcomes and skills requirements can overcome these problems. The issue of fast tracking degrees is rather contentious. While this allows students to enter the workforce faster there is a belief amongst some academics that students are not mature enough to enter the workforce after two years of university education. In reality, students who do not choose university often enter the tourism and hospitality industries at a much younger age, so this seems like somewhat of a moot point.

The results indicate that tourism students were not at all enthusiastic about after hours or weekend classes. The views of tourism students also differed significantly with those of business and accounting students on some of these options. Students in general did not find technology enhanced learning approaches such as podcasts, videoconferencing or fully online subjects particularly appealing, although the notion of video lectures was a little more appealing.

An overall interpretation of the results seems to provide more support for the proponents of blended learning approaches. A combination of online and face-to-face learning was rated as reasonably appealing. Students were also excited by the prospect of more interaction in face-to-face sessions. Such activities would imply the use of multimedia, activity-based learning, discussions, debates, role plays, student presentations and so forth rather than the traditional lecture format.

As with Table 5, a series of comparisons were conducted to see whether any of the tourism student characteristics reported in Table 1 influenced their preferences for different flexible learning approaches. A Mann-Whitney analysis identified the following differences (using  $p < 0.1$  as the cutoff):

- Students who were working were much more likely to find intensive block subjects running daily over 1-2 weeks appealing ( $p=0.038$ ;  $U=302.5$ ). Not surprisingly, these students also nominated subjects with fewer face-to-face lectures as appealing ( $p=0.021$ ;  $U=286.0$ ).
- Conversely, students from a non-English speaking background were significantly *less* likely to rate fewer face-to-face lectures as appealing ( $p=0.019$ ;  $U=163.5$ ). These face to face lectures are clearly valued by NESB students. NESB students were also less likely to find podcasts of lectures appealing ( $p=0.073$ ;  $U=196.0$ ).
- Students who were the first in their immediate family to attend university were more likely to find the prospect of field trips appealing ( $p=0.035$ ;  $U=440.0$ ). The overall pattern of results indicate that this group of students found many of the flexible opportunities for 'real life' experiences more appealing but results for other items were not significant. Perhaps because of their background, these students value the potential of 'hands-on' skills fostered by these types of experiences more strongly.

## **CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS**

The results add to the existing literature on flexible learning in tourism and hospitality management by offering a holistic view of student preferences. A number of key themes are evident. The results confirm that generation Y students do devote a large part of their working week to paid employment and that students recognise that this may be interfering with their study. Students are clearly enthusiastic about the prospect of more flexible learning, although there are clear preferences for particular approaches. The most favoured approaches are centred on techniques that offer tourism and hospitality students opportunities to engage with educators, peers and future employers in a structured learning context. This provides further support for the

notion that generation Y students are social, experiential learners. Approaches that are perceived as unappealing include learning approaches that offer limited opportunities for interaction and a high level of self-direction (such as textbook based subjects, fully online subjects and courses, video conferencing and podcasts). Approaches that conflict with the times tourism and hospitality students usually work (i.e. on weekends and after hours) are also unattractive.

The research has a number of implications for educators. Firstly, educators need to acknowledge that fundamental generational changes require new approaches to teaching and learning. It is suggested that flexible learning is one approach that aligns well with the emerging needs of Generation Y. Students are not likely to work less in the future and in fact may be under financial pressure to work even more. In this context there is a need for innovative teaching and learning approaches which allow students to structure their study around work commitments. The student preferences presented in this research provides tangible evidence of the types of activities that are likely to be successful. Some tourism and hospitality educators have already adopted more flexible approaches, for others it will be difficult to shift from the rigidly timetabled didactic lecture-tutorial model which has dominated Australian higher education in the past. However, educators cannot make this shift alone; a shift toward flexible learning requires a genuine commitment and investment at the institutional level. Secondly, the research presented in this paper provides some clues about how tourism students differ from business and accounting students. Tourism and hospitality educators should seek to confirm whether flexible learning approaches in other disciplines are likely to be successful for their own cohort of students. Finally, the research demonstrates some important differences between students on the basis of various characteristics. The most pertinent of these are the differences between non-English speaking students and native English speakers. NESB students appear reluctant to accept flexible learning approaches that involve a reduction or elimination of face-to-face contact. There is perhaps also an expectation amongst international students who pay high tuition fees that they will receive more traditional face-to-face learning experiences. This highlights an important tension that needs to be carefully managed by Australian educators.

While the research makes a number of contributions to the tourism literature the results should be interpreted in the context of several limitations. Firstly, this research was limited to one institution. While the sample is considered to be representative of the student cohort at this institution, other universities may have other characteristics which are important to consider. Furthermore, characteristics such as gender, ethnic background, year level and student performance might be useful independent variables to consider. Secondly, this research asked students to respond to a range of flexible learning approaches which they may not necessarily have been exposed to in the past. Arguably responses might be different if in a perfect world students had the opportunity experience each of the approaches which they were asked to evaluate. This limitation can only be overcome with more detailed applied research into these varied techniques and this presents a useful opportunity for other researchers. Thirdly, this research did not set out to evaluate a full and comprehensive set of approaches. Future research could undoubtedly add to the list of approaches presented here. A final limitation of this research is that it focussed on the connection of work and study and did not consider other personal and family commitments that students might have. These limitations again present a number of opportunities for researchers wishing to build on these findings. In particular, a cross-institutional study of tourism student preferences for flexible learning would be most interesting. A longitudinal study of changing student attitudes toward flexible learning would also provide an indication of likely future trends in this area.

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