Chapter 19
Is It Time to Create a Hierarchy of Online Student Needs?

Jennifer Chung and Stephen McKenzie

Abstract Online education is becoming widely accepted in tertiary education including by academics, students and employers. Educators have created new and innovative ways of teaching curriculum to online students that produce academically and employable equivalent graduates. In response to this success, we believe that it is time to shift our online attention onto creating a student experience that is equivalent to the entire on-campus experience, and increasing student well-being, success and satisfaction. In this chapter, we introduce a model of an online education hierarchy of student needs—a novel adaptation of Maslow’s hierarchy of needs. Online education is closing the gap between academic equivalence of on-campus and online education, and we contend that the next phase of meeting online student needs includes addressing academic and general well-being, and a strong sense of community, connection and belongingness, which may eventually result in online self-actualization. We describe the importance of student well-being, provide an example of a mindfulness well-being component of a large online course and discuss how a student’s sense of community, connection and belongingness is impacted on by their fully online education world. In this chapter, we explore what should be next on the online education agenda and what needs to be done to really achieve online–on-campus equivalence.

19.1 Introduction

Providing high-quality academic resources and state-of-the-art technology to deliver online education is essential to achieving optimally successful online education;

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however, there are other aspects of optimal online education which are less obvious, and which are becoming increasingly important as online education advances. Although online education is expanding worldwide, some traditional educators and lecturers question the broad equivalence of online education, including work-ready skills and employability of graduates from online programmes. With this in mind, many online educators are working to address misconceptions about the non-equivalence of online education and ensure that the education that online students receive is equivalent in all ways to traditional education. Furthermore, efforts are constantly being made such that students studying online are as fully educationally equipped in all ways as students studying on-campus. Creating fully equivalent academic experience has predominantly been at the forefront of online educators’ agenda thus far, and perhaps rightly so. However, is it now time to shift our focus and attention to creating a truly equivalent, and broadly valuable experience for students studying online? We would argue, yes.

Students who are studying in a traditional on-campus mode are exposed to and given the opportunity to take part in a number of social, non-academic and well-being related activities. Typically these resources or activities are organised by both the university and by student associations or groups. Aside from organised events, on-campus students are also exposed to many impromptu and serendipitous experiences—for example, sitting next to someone at a lecture can lead to ongoing friendships, peer assistance and co-learning, professional networking opportunities, and more. It is widely recognised that students attend university for their academic benefit and to further their education. However, in addition to this core value of attending universities in the traditional mode, students gain important intangible life benefits that may contribute to their general and academic well-being, sense of connection and community, sense of purpose and sense of identity.

Unfortunately, it seems that for students studying online, educational intangibles such as well-being and connection are not widely recognised or seen as being important. Has the time, therefore, come for online education to advance to the equivalent to the next stage of Maslow’s hierarchy of needs (Maslow, 1943)? Maslow’s basic physiological needs (e.g. water, shelter, sleep) could be seen as equivalent to high-quality academic materials that are the basic online student’s needs. Now that these basic online education needs are being widely met is it time to advance to the next levels of the hierarchy, towards the need for online academic self-actualization—consisting of a strong sense of well-being, connectedness and community? Our online education adaptation of Maslow’s hierarchy of needs is depicted in Fig. 19.1.

We contend that fostering a fully equivalent and deeply valuable university experience for students studying online must include addressing: student academic well-being, general well-being and feelings of connectedness and belongingness with their peers, academics and the wider university community. In this chapter, we focus on the next level of online education student needs above academic needs (Fig. 19.1). We discuss the importance of student well-being, provide an example of how universities can offer valuable well-being resources for their students, and the importance of recognising and addressing students’ feelings of community and connection—all within an increasingly broad online learning context.
19.2 Well-Being in the Online World

Research has reported the growing incidence of students with poor mental health and well-being, and increased stress and emotional health problems, including in comparison to the general population (Stallman, 2010; Storrie, Ahern, & Tuckett, 2010). In addition to study-related stress, students studying online are typically also juggling multiple other stressors and responsibilities such as full-time employment, and caring for families or children (Colorado & Eberle, 2010; Johnson, 2015). When these additional factors are combined with the physical isolation and distance between these students and their peers, instructors, administrators, and university staff—online students are at greater risk of not receiving the support they need to reduce their likelihood of increased stress and decreased well-being.

At most university campuses, non-academic support services and resources are offered free of charge to students. For example, universities often offer free on-campus counselling services, well-being enhancing activities such as mindfulness practices, student advocacy and financial assistance. By simply walking around campus, students are exposed to posters advertising the availability of these and other broad student support resources. In comparison, studying in a fully online mode without access to the physical campus immediately reduces the likelihood of students accessing these resources, particularly as many of these resources are only offered on-campus.
To achieve the next level of the hierarchy of online student needs it is necessary to recognise that meeting students’ non-academic needs is now essential to their achieving optimal and optimally equivalent online education. An example of introducing well-being improving resources into online education is presented here. The School of Psychological Sciences (SoPS) at Monash University, Australia, incorporated and piloted a mindfulness for well-being component of its large new online fourth-year psychology course, the Graduate Diploma of Psychology Advanced (GDPA). Mindfulness is a technique that is commonly used to enhance well-being and decrease stress that has been widely used and strongly supported by research evidence as a non-invasive and non-stigma provoking intervention (Ma & Teasdale, 2004; McKenzie & Hassed, 2012). In university students, mindfulness has been positively associated with improved academic performance, and also improvements in stress levels, depression and academic anxiety (Hassed, De Lisle, Sullivan, & Pier, 2009; Hjeltnes, Binder, Moltu, & Dundas, 2015; McConville, McAleer, & Hahne, 2017).

A selection of mindfulness exercises was created specifically to be incorporated in the GDPA course’s Learning Management System (LMS) for students to complete at their own pace. These resources consisted of six short, guided audio mindfulness exercises, all of which were presented by a mindfulness expert and researcher, SM. This pilot programme was recently evaluated in a joint online education research project between Monash University and King’s College London. In this study, the online mindfulness activities were provided to both online and on-campus students in disciplines including psychology, neuroscience, public health, business and IT, over a period of 6 weeks for online students and 12 weeks for on-campus students, matching the lengths of their teaching semesters (Coxon, Dyer, McKenzie, & Chung, 2019). It was found that, overall, students enjoyed and found benefits in practicing mindfulness during the research study’s time period, such as increased awareness of the present moment. The participants provided constructive suggestions to improve future iterations of the program. Results of this pilot study have revealed that students who were exposed to the mindfulness exercises experienced a lower level of stress at the end of their study period, compared to their student counterparts in the control condition (Coxon et al., 2019).

A second generation and iteration of the Monash University and King’s College London online mindfulness for student well-being programme is currently being developed, and is part of a larger project creating a university-wide LMS-based orientation and on-going support site for online students. The second generation changes to the programme include lengthening the guided audio mindfulness exercises from approximately 2 min each to approximately 10 min each, providing the mindfulness activities in a variety of formats including video, written material and activities, as well as variations being provided in the presentation of exercises themselves (e.g. gender of narrator, narrator style). This resource will include a suite of academic
and non-academic student resources that will be used by and available to all online students throughout their studies. The site will be created for and offered specifically to online students at Monash University, a first at the university. The inclusion of online-based mindfulness programmes to enhance student well-being will provide greater reach and equivalence for students studying online and will enhance, promote and support student well-being.

More research is needed to fully evaluate the effectiveness of the online mindfulness activities provided for Monash University and King’s College students—from the perspectives of enhancing the academic experience and as a wellness-intervention within the educational environment. A range of research questions need to be addressed by further research into the well-being and other benefits of mindfulness and other well-being enhancing online resources, such as:

- Are the resources targeting and reaching all online students?
- Are the resources being utilised by online students to help well-being?
- Are the resources being utilised by online students as a reaction to their decreased well-being and stress compared with on-campus students?

Although not solely focusing on student well-being and wellness, another example of the development and creation of an online orientation programme for online students has been described in a case study by Horvath et al. (2019). Horvath and colleagues recognised the need for increased student preparedness and ongoing support for students within their fully online nutrition course that launched in 2015. Their approach to the development of their online orientation site included surveying students to understand personal and external factors they believe impacts on their studies, as well as confidence in using technology to study. Based on their survey findings, Horvath and colleagues’ created a “Plan, Prepare and Connect” LMS site that includes resources, videos, step-by-step guides and online interactive sessions. Their orientation site focuses on topics such as setting up course and career expectations, student preparedness for online study, organisation and time management, confidence with technology and communication and sense of community. In addition, students are invited to complete screening questionnaires on health and well-being, and technology as well as attend live sessions with support staff and student peer leaders (Horvath et al., 2019).

To the authors’ knowledge, there are very few non-academic, online, support resources provided to online students, or at least very few that have been documented in literature to date. Although not specifically targeted or offered to online students, web- and app-based well-being resources have been investigated in the recent research literature. Papadatou-Pastou et al. (2019) explored the feasibility and acceptance of a tailor-made online well-being and study support skills system, “MePlusMe”. This system was targeted to students who presented with mild or moderate mental health difficulties (Papadatou-Pastou et al., 2019). Ray, Arpan, Oehme, Perko, and Clark (2019) investigated the effects of an online wellness-intervention and found that students who were exposed to the intervention reported high self-efficacy and a greater likelihood of engaging in self-help activities and utilising on-campus resources. To our knowledge, both systems and interventions
reported by Papadatou-Pastou et al. and Ray et al. were not integrated into the students’ LMSs.

In this section of the chapter, we discussed the importance of and provided examples of resources targeting student well-being and wellness. Students who are studying on-campus are offered the opportunity to take part in and receive support from services to better their well-being or help them handle study and academic stresses. Currently, students who are studying online without access to a physical university campus are unfortunately likely to not receive support resources that will help them reach the higher stages of online self-actualization, and develop personal as well as academic well-being.

19.4 Building Communities Within the Online World

Another important aspect of creating real equivalence between online study and on-campus study, and the greater student experience that can be even more challenging to address, is how to best achieve a real experience of online student community and belongingness? On-campus equivalent online connectedness and community could be seen as accompanying student well-being needs in the next stage of the online hierarchy of student needs (Fig. 19.1), and the challenge is how online educators can recognise and then climb this online step.

Humans thrive on interaction, engagement and support from the people who they interact with. Connectedness is a key component of the human wisdom traditions that underlie Maslow’s hierarchy of human needs psychological and philosophical construct (Maslow, 1943), as well as our online education hierarchy of student needs construct. “A human being is a part of the whole, called by us, ‘Universe,’” a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feelings as something separated from the rest—a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness.” Albert Einstein. Primary and pre-school aged children thrive on social interaction that is necessary for their optimal learning of social skills, which require the development of an understanding of other people’s world view, and of how our behaviours can influence other people’s behaviours (Weinstein & Bearison, 1985). In the workplace, teamwork and working collaboratively can help with the generation of new ideas, the exchange of ideas, and fostering of creativity (McKenzie, 2015). These examples demonstrate the importance and positive influence of being connected with other people, particularly like-minded people.

In the education setting, research shows that there are positive associations between feelings of a strong sense of community, belongingness, and connectedness with peers and increased engagement, academic success, decreased loneliness, increased satisfaction and overall learning experience (Dolan, Kain, Reilly, & Bansal, 2017; Sadera, Robertson, Song, & Midon, 2009; Vesely, Bloom, & Sherlock, 2007). What happens, however, when those ‘around’ us can’t be physically contacted and we can’t necessarily see or hear them? This is what it can be like for students studying online.
Online education often claims that its asynchronous nature is an advantage, however, there are drawbacks to this flexible feature as well. Students have less or limited time to connect in real time with their peers and instructors, which reduces their intangible chances of building a strong network and feelings of connectedness. This is one of the key challenges in creating a holistic student experience in online education, and one that needs to be addressed and the progression up the hierarchy of online student needs will be our next great online education challenge. An approach to meeting this challenge via increasing online students’ sense of community is provided in Chap. 18 of this book, Adams (in press).

19.5 Reflections and Recommendations

Online education is widely becoming accepted as providing on-campus equivalent educational materials and producing academically equivalent graduates. However, an important and relatively unrecognised aspect of the evolving online education world that is yet to become online equivalent is the full student experience. Students studying online without access to a physical campus are not yet provided with on-campus equivalent ease of access to services and resources that can accompany and promote real student well-being and a sense of connection and community; both of which are positively associated with academic success and engagement, and with overall student satisfaction (Liu, Magjuka, Bonk, & Seung-Jee, 2007; Stallman, 2010).

We recommend that universities that are providing online education—or are looking to provide online education in the future—attempt to replicate or provide alternative comprehensive online resources for online students that will not only assist their educational success, but provide an optimal whole university experience. The real challenge is, of course, to provide an educational experience for online students that is fully transferable, scalable and equivalent to the on-campus whole student experience. This might be a difficult challenge, however, it is one that we must face in order to really achieve online—on-campus student experience equivalence.

So, in answer to our question—“Is it time to create an online hierarchy of student needs?”—we have argued that it is now vital that we attend to online students’ full range of needs, far beyond their need for academic equivalence. The recent rapid expansion of the need for online education in response to Covid-19 has re-enforced the need for TOTAL online education. It is time for online course educators to fully acknowledge that students’ well-being and sense of belongingness and connectedness are key factors in ensuring a well-rounded online university experience that produces life successful as well as academically successful graduates. It is time for online students to realise what their online education really can be and needs to be. We must take action, now, to ensure that the full needs of online students, who we can’t always see or hear, are realised and met.
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