A Health Check of Avondale's Distance Education Program: Where Have we Been? Where are we Going Next?

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Abstract
Avondale College of Higher Education has been offering tertiary courses for over 120 years. In the past two decades, this institution has extended its programs to include distance courses for students who opt to study online or are not able to attend on-campus courses at Avondale’s Lake Macquarie and Sydney campuses. While all of the institutions courses are evaluated on a regular basis, no formal evaluation had ever been undertaken of the distance education program as a whole. During 2017, a mixed methods research project was conducted to gather evaluative data from recent and current distance students using questionnaires and focus groups. The results of the study provide insight into the extent to which the distance education program at the College provides a space in which learning relationships can develop in online communities. Also, suggestions for future improvement and further research recommendations are provided. Findings of this study may be of interest to educators and administrators who incorporate online components in their curricula.

Introduction
Avondale was established in 1897 as a faith-based institution with a spiritually focused vision, mission, and motto. By the middle of the twentieth century the College had begun to diversify and offer degrees through external and affiliation programs, offering
its own NSW government accredited degrees from 1974 (Avondale College of Higher Education, 2018). Distance education was introduced in the mid-1990s with external affiliation, to upgrade education graduates from diploma to degree status. This was followed in 2000 by a blended Master’s program in three disciplines, and gradually, as the capacity for online learning was developed, more courses were offered in blended or totally distance mode. Since 2006, the number of courses offered online has steadily increased. While early versions of distance education courses at the College involved students enrolling either by on-campus or distance (online) mode, more recent years have seen a lessening of this divide; instead, distance and on-campus students are currently enrolled in the same units and often self-select which aspects of their studies they attend in on-campus or distance mode. This more flexible approach has enabled students to tailor their pattern of attendance to meet the demands of their complex lives. Currently the College offers five undergraduate courses, and eight post graduate courses by distance education using an online mode, and an increasing number of individual units are also offered online.

Although Avondale has been offering distance education courses to undergraduate and postgraduate students for almost two decades, a comprehensive review of these students’ experiences had not been undertaken before the study reported in this paper was conducted. Like many other schools and universities, Avondale regularly administers end-of-semester surveys to gather feedback about the quality of the learning experiences of all students who complete on-campus and distance courses, and this feedback has become a valuable source of data in assisting the continual improvement of each course’s curriculum design and teaching methods. However, the distance cohort of students had not yet been specifically targeted to elicit information about their unique experiences of studying via distance. Since 25% of the institutions students choose to complete their entire course by distance and 40% of the College students currently choose to complete some of their studies in a distance mode, this large proportion of the student population at the institution needed to be consulted to ensure the quality assurance system of the institution was representative of all groups of students and to ensure the experiences of distance learners will become more integral to the institution’s direction.

Background
Because of the convenience of learning online, distance education programs and online learning technologies have become increasingly popular in primary, secondary and tertiary education over the last twenty years. The number of tertiary education students taking at least one online class in the USA in 2006 was approximately 3.5 million (Allen & Seaman, 2007). This number almost doubled to 6.7 million in 2011 (Allen & Seaman, 2013). In 2012, 62.4% of college and universities reported offering distance programs (Allen & Seaman, 2017). In addition to more tertiary students enrolling in online classes, Rovai and Downey (2010) report an increase in the number of distance education programs offered by higher education providers, including for-profit institutions. Indeed, institutions of higher learning are increasingly making distance education an integral part of their long term planning (Simonson, Smaldino, Albright, & Zvacek, 2014). The adoption of digital technologies has also increased within the school sector. Schools have been reported as integrating varied degrees of online technologies into their curricula (Neyland, 2011) and groups of educators meet regularly to share ideas about how to use learning technologies in primary and secondary education (Voogt et al., 2017). These trends mean that the issue of program quality is important, as colleges and universities are challenged to provide quality education to a growing number of online students.

Many suggestions, guidelines and exemplars of online learning practices have been published previously in various formats such as Herrington and her associates’ (2007) guidelines for authentic course design. Mbati and Minnaar’s (2015) guidelines for facilitating interactive online learning programs and Salmon’s (2013) suggestions about how to design and moderate online learning courses. These guidelines are useful tools for those responsible for designing and teaching online courses which are frequently taken by students studying by distance and/or using online learning technologies. Over the last decade, many of these published guidelines have been consulted and used to guide the design and implementation of online courses for distance students at Avondale. For example, the institution’s Online Learning Policy [policy no. A.35] was modified during recent years to ensure student-centred concepts of learning that focus on engagement and authentic activities were integrated throughout the policy, replacing the use of teacher-centred terms such as “delivery” and “lecturing”. Furthermore, a set of benchmarks have been established, for professional development purposes, reflecting many of the principles and recommended practices from renowned online educators, to guide academic staff in their design of interactive activities in online, blended and on-campus courses. Known as the “Minimum Moodle Expectations”, these benchmarks provide detailed instructions about how to design
learning resources, activities and assessment tasks that engage students in authentic learning across all modes of study.

Throughout the history of distance education, various successes and problems have been reported. For example, Allen and Seaman (2013) report that in 2003 only 57.2% of educators “rated the learning outcomes in online education as the same or superior to those in face-to-face” (p. 5). Nine years later, that figure increased to 77 percent (Allen & Seaman, 2013). So, while things have improved, these two studies by Allen and Seaman suggest that there is still a significant proportion (23%), who are less than impressed with distance education programs. And this negative perception of distance education programs has been bolstered by a higher dropout rate among some distance education programs when compared with face-to-face programs (Bell & Federman, 2013; Patterson & McFadden, 2009; Tyler-Smith, 2006). Academic leaders report that this higher dropout rate will impede the growth of distance education programs (Allen & Seaman, 2013).

The lack of direct interaction with the lecturer may be a contributing factor in the higher dropout rates of online students. Lack of direct interaction between students and instructors, may allow problems which naturally occur in the course of any instruction to fester, and, if not addressed, these problems may undermine a distance education program (Simonson et al., 2014). Besides leaving the learner frustrated, not addressing the problems can further the perception of distance education programs as being impersonal (Perreault, Waldman, Alexander, & Zhao, 2002; Sunal, Sunal, Odell, & Sundberg, 2003). Addressing problems and assuring that instructors are providing clear channels of communication with their students is critical if the programs are to be successful.

In general, distance education programs need to focus upon quality if they are going to continue to attract and retain students (Moore, Lockee, & Burton, 2002). The issue of quality is also important for schools offering some curricula components through use of online technologies, such as wikis in primary schools (Woo, Chu, Ho, & Li, 2011) and online collaborative modules in secondary schools (DeWitt, Siraj, & Alias, 2014). Whether full programs or program components are offered via online technologies, their quality requires monitoring, as do on-campus learning programs and activities. Data collection to assure quality must be “carried out on a regular basis to monitor and improve online program outcomes so that the educational services satisfy program goals and meet student needs” (Rovai & Downey, 2010, p. 144). Surveys of students have been a frequently used method of assessing the quality of distance education programs. Focus groups have been less used (Cochran, Baker, Benson, & Rhea, 2016). The data collection methods we used to determine the quality of our online courses are now outlined.

**Research methodology**

All participants reported in this paper were college students at Avondale who had recently completed or were currently enrolled in at least one distance unit as part of their degree studies, regardless of whether or not they were completing their entire course in a distance mode. The research approach utilised in this study adopted a mixed methods approach which guided the collection of qualitative and quantitative data (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). Using two research methods enabled data to be gathered from the student-stakeholders of the institution’s distance education program. These data could then be evaluated in a way that provided feedback to the institution about the perceived quality of the courses that comprise the distance program. For example, because the institution’s approach to online and blended learning is intentionally focused on the development of interactive and engaging courses in which students were active learners (as evidenced in the Online Learning Policy [policy no. A.35] and Moodle Minimum Expectations mentioned earlier), many items in the questionnaire and specific questions used in the focus groups were designed to elicit student feedback about the extent to which the courses they were enrolled in engaged them in active learning tasks. Furthermore, this methodology ensured that the voices of the distance student population contributed to the direction of the College. This methodology has been designed in a way that could be replicated in other educational institutions such as universities, colleges and schools.

**Data collection methodology**

Quantitative methods of data collection were used initially in this study to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the distance education programs at the College. The cohort of eligible participants in this study were invited to complete an online questionnaire. This online questionnaire was based upon data collection instruments used in two previous studies. The first draft of the questionnaire was generated from an instrument developed by Muilenburg and Berge (2005), that identified aspects of a distance program which might become barriers to online learning for students. The statements of this questionnaire were modified at times to better address the institution’s specific approach to distance education. For example, rather than focusing on administrative and academic needs in general, the
specific titles of the administrative and academic support services at the institution were specifically addressed in the questionnaire. A second draft of the questionnaire included program quality indicators, as derived from Smidt, Li, Bunk, Kochem and Mc Andrew (2017). Participants were asked to rate the extent to which the distance program addressed these quality indicators. A five-point rating scale was used for each statement made in the final questionnaire. In addition, students were given the option to make comments explaining their answers for each aspect. If replicated by other education institutions, the questionnaire used in this study could be modified to appropriately reflect the specific nature of the institution’s context.

Once the questionnaires had been administered and analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), descriptive statistics (i.e., means and standard deviations), were used to identify areas of strength and weakness. In addition, the students’ written responses to the questionnaire’s open-ended questions were identified and analysed to identify themes evident in the qualitative data. These themes largely revealed students’ perceptions about the strengths and weaknesses of the institution’s online, distance learning program. Also evident in the students’ comments were suggestions for future improvement of the program.

After identifying areas of strength and weakness, and areas of possible improvement, focus group interviews were conducted with randomly selected groups of participants. To ensure the background of any one researcher did not influence the collection or analysis of the data from the focus groups, multiple focus group facilitators conducted these focus groups. To further address reflexivity in this stage of the research study, the processes associated with designating, facilitating and analysing the data from the focus groups were coordinated by the chief investigator of the project but also incorporated input from at least three of the researchers engaged with the project. Lastly, in case any of the participants wanted to comment on issues that were not reflected in the focus group questions, each participant was provided with opportunities to comment on issues that were important to them but were not necessarily reflected in any of the research questions.

These focus groups were conducted in person and through video conferencing, depending on the availability and location of the students being interviewed. Specifically, participants were given the opportunity 1) to discuss whether they perceived the identified strengths or weaknesses to be valid and to explain why; 2) to provide examples of incidents which could illustrate these strengths or weaknesses; 3) to help identify ways of addressing each weakness; and 4) to make recommendations to maintain what they had confirmed to be the institution’s areas of strength. The discussions that took place in relation to these questions were recorded and transcribed.

Once the quantitative and qualitative data from the questionnaires were analysed, followed by the qualitative data from the focus group interviews, both sets of analysis were triangulated to establish the key findings from the students’ responses and comments. The end product of this analysis was a set of recommendations to be implemented throughout distance units and courses at Avondale.

Findings
Population and sampling
Out of a possible 288 students, 92 responded to the questionnaire. However, 18 respondents were eliminated as they did not confirm they had taken a distance unit, and a further 15 respondents were eliminated because they responded to less than 50% of the questionnaire items. A total of 59 respondents remained, which equates to a return rate of approximately 22% 1. The larger majority, about 92% (n = 54), of those respondents indicated that they were currently enrolled in a distance course at Avondale and the majority, 53% (n = 31), had completed or almost completed six or more distance units at the College, while 41% (n = 24) had completed or almost completed two to five units. Overall, the students were deemed as being qualified to evaluate the program, thus rendering the data gathered as valid.

Emergent themes
A summary of the main themes that emerged from the data analysis processes and the alignment of the quantitative and qualitative data can be found in Table 1.

The themes that were revealed in the focus group interviews in most cases aligned with the information being sought in the questionnaire. This resulted in the categories of isolation, lecturer feedback, organisation of unit materials, the support of the lecturer, the experience of online forums, the flexibility of learning online, the catering for different learning styles, and the quality of the instructional materials to be identified as key areas of attention in online learning experiences. Table 1 is presented as a matrix making it possible for the reader to triangulate the quantitative and qualitative results without needing to carefully read paragraphs while visualising the connections. For example, the row that reports on different learning styles shows that comments were made in focus groups about the need for more attention to be given to different...
The quantitative results showed that in the majority of areas, most students were quite satisfied with their online experiences. Nevertheless, comments needed to be heard and are areas for improvement.

Additional majority outcomes were identified in the qualitative data. Most students (74%, n = 44) agreed that objectives of the units they had enrolled in actually measured instructional objectives. Slightly fewer (70%, n = 41) believed that the College’s level of academic rigour in distance units was the same or higher than the rigour they had experienced or expected of units taught in a face–to-face format. A similar number agreed their distance units had helped them think critically. Close to two thirds (64%, n = 38) assessed their distance units had helped them apply knowledge to the real world, while 63% (n = 37) considered their distance units actively engaged them with the subject matter. It appears that the technology and supporting Learning Management System (LMS) used to facilitate the units were found to be dependable by 81% (n = 48) of students and 86% (n = 51) of students found the lecturers to be personable.

The quantitative results showed that in the majority of areas, most students were quite satisfied with their online experiences. Therefore, any negative comments in these domains are limited to a minority of the student cohort. Nevertheless, their comments needed to be heard and are areas for improvement.

Valuable insights gleaned from these students showed that it is possible for there to be: a sense of feeling like a second class student (even though the lecturer didn’t intend this). Example, distance students had to watch the internal students’ videos. Made us feel we weren’t as good as them (the internal students).

Further, about a third of the respondents, after reflecting on their distance education units were critical of the academic rigour compared to face-to-face interaction, did not recognize active engagement with the subject matter, and believed that the distance units did not help them apply knowledge to the real world or foster critical thinking. These issues must be addressed through curriculum review and improved online pedagogy. It may require general, or even individual specific, professional development.

### Table 1: A triangulation of questionnaire and focus group data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Positive qualitative comments</th>
<th>Negative qualitative comments</th>
<th>Quantitative Results</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Isolation</td>
<td><img src="#" alt="Green" /></td>
<td>Some feelings of isolation from lecturers and other students.</td>
<td>56% (n=33) said collaboration with other students was excellent or good but only 50% (n=30) reported this happening in a formal way organised by the lecturer.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feedback</td>
<td><img src="#" alt="Green" /></td>
<td>Would like more feedback.</td>
<td>83% (n=49) of students found lecturer feedback excellent or good.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organisation</td>
<td><img src="#" alt="Green" /></td>
<td>Some coursework could be more organised online.</td>
<td>71.4% (n=42) of students found online course materials well organised.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lecturer Support</td>
<td><img src="#" alt="Green" /></td>
<td>Lecturer support and accessibility.</td>
<td>88% (n=52) of students found lecturer support excellent or good.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online Forums</td>
<td><img src="#" alt="Green" /></td>
<td>Online Forums have been a good experience.</td>
<td>88% (n=52) of students found lecturer support excellent or good.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flexibility</td>
<td><img src="#" alt="Green" /></td>
<td>Studying by distance makes life do-able.</td>
<td>88% (n=52) of students found lecturer support excellent or good.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Different learning styles</td>
<td><img src="#" alt="Green" /></td>
<td>Would like different learning styles to be catered for.</td>
<td>49% (n=29) reported that different learning styles were catered for.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality of instructional materials</td>
<td><img src="#" alt="Green" /></td>
<td><img src="#" alt="Green" /></td>
<td>79% (n=47) of students reported excellent or good quality instructional materials.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
and mentoring for program providers/lecturers. Other students commented in the focus groups that they would rather have had more regular access to other distance students and would have preferred to have more scope to learn using their own preferred learning styles. Another useful comment from the focus groups was that students find it easy to miss new material when it is placed on the learning management system. They commented that sometimes adjustments may have been made to assessments from the originally published editions that they overlooked.

Despite these comments that are suggesting places of improvement in the online experience, the overwhelming bulk of responses were positive with many very helpful recommendations and affirmations for the lecturers involved. Some examples follow.

It’s important to make the distance students feel part of the Avondale community … In general, I feel that I have been included … that you’re on equal terms, that you’re considered a student just as much as the internals [on-campus students] as well.

Overall, a very positive experience. I’ve just found everyone in all the subjects are all great. I feel like I’m making good progress and getting there.

Synchronous interaction with tutor and other students is very helpful.

Ability to choose your own topic to research was very relevant and inspiring. Got me quite excited actually.

Lecturers have been very good at replying to questions and inquiries.

You’ve also got to think of the lecturer’s time. It would be so difficult to be a lecturer and accommodate everyone’s needs.

It would be nice to see a bit more consistency in the look of the different Moodle sites for each subject. I’ve noticed, it seems like you are aiming towards more consistency. Some of the sites that I’ve accessed this semester have got a little tool bar at the top … there’s different links that you can click on to access different material.

Specific areas for improvement to focus on from the forum interviews surrounded the idea of isolation. The students reported this isolation in relation to feeling distant to the action they perceived happened on campus. This included isolation from other students and isolation from the content because, in some cases, lectures were either not recorded and uploaded or uploaded too late to synchronise with the course materials for the current week.

While 83% (n = 49) of students found lecturer feedback to be excellent, there was a small proportion of students who were looking for more:

Generally, I have to talk to the lecturer to get proper feedback on my assignment.

More constructive criticism would be greatly appreciated as this would show me what areas of research or writing I need to improve on.

The quantitative data revealed that 71% (n = 42) of students found that course materials were well-organised, but some of the students’ comments expressed opinions that they would like to see them organised in a different way. For example, one student preferred to have all of the materials available at the beginning of the semester:

I know that this would not work for all students but I would have liked to have all the course materials available at the beginning so that I could plan my time.

Discussion and recommendations

As identified in the literature (Celic, Christian, & Matthes, 2016), relationships are the conduit through which the ethos and values of an institution are transmitted to students. The centrality of relationships as an indicator of high quality online learning contexts has been a consistent theme in literature related to distance, blended and online learning over the last few decades. Over a decade ago, Keough (2005) suggested, in the title of his paper, that “Relationships not technology are key to online learning”. More recently, the recognition of the role of human relationships, online presence and communication still dominate online learning research. In this study, a positive attitude towards lecturers feedback emerged.
organisation of course materials.

Based on the qualitative findings that highlighted
the importance of social learning, academic staff
at the institution clearly require professional
development activities and resources that will enable
them to extend their skills in designing online courses
that promote community building. These skills clearly
depend on the lecturer’s ability to perform a facilitator
role, as explained by Ouyang and Scharber (2017),
or a moderator role, as described by Salmon (2013).
Skills in the facilitation of interactive activities such as
online discussions are often found to be at the centre
of an online learning community, as indicated by
multiple educational researchers (Ball & Leppington,
2013; Buchenroth-Martin, D’Martino, & Martin, 2017;
McDonald, 2014). Since students reported on valuing
the interactive and personalised aspects of their
learning, the professional development offered to
lecturers needs to be focused on how to facilitate
interactive distance units of study that incorporate
relevant communication tools.

Furthermore, the development of authentic
and personalised relationships, developed in
online learning contexts, is frequently linked to
the construction of a Community of Practice or a
Community of Inquiry in which teachers and students
work together to pursue activities that facilitate high
quality learning (Dawson, 2006; Herbers, Antelo,
Ettling, & Buck, 2011; Kiggins & Cambourne, 2007;
Swan, Garrison, & Richardson, 2009). The isolation
reported by some of the students in this study
indicated that institution’s distance courses need
to be designed in a way that included, rather than
excluded, distance students from interacting with
their lecturers and other groups of students. Thus,
by focusing on the development of lecturers’ skills
in both course design (in activities that often occur
before the semester begins) and course facilitation
(activities that happen during the semester), it is
anticipated that the College’s online course offerings
will come to feature a strong community and,
consequently, an environment in which learning
relationships (teacher-student and student-student
relationships) are central to the course’s character.

While the professional development staff and
academic teaching staff of the institution hold a
unified view of the value of the institution’s Christian
ethos, the fact that this element was not highlighted
in any of the questionnaires or focus groups suggests
that the College still needs to develop a practical
strategy for making sure that the Christian ethos is
transparent for all students that study in a distance
mode. To help guide this institution in developing
these strategies, future data collection methods
should incorporate questions about students’
perceptions of the institutions ethos as reflected in
the distance education course.

The findings from the current study have
been shared with the academic staff who teach
the distance units. These findings have also
been integrated into the institution’s professional
development program, which offers strategies to
address the issues identified in this research. A
major emphasis of this training focuses upon using
strategies to develop relationships between lecturers
and learners. The findings from this research
indicates that the establishment of these relationships
sets the foundation for ensuring the success of a
distance unit, the lack of which may weaken an
otherwise well-designed course. Furthermore,
the Christian ethos may be more likely to become
manifest through the development of personalised
professional relationships between students and
teachers in distance courses.

Lastly, the institution has committed to ongoing
research into the students’ experiences (especially
that of the distance students) of learning in courses
that comprise online components within the
Avondale context. While the academic staff at the
institution remains vigilant about the publication
of new research pertinent to online learning, they
intend to continue researching their own scholarly
practice. This research will definitely investigate
the experience of online education from students’
and teachers’ perspectives, but it will also be
characterised by exploratory strategies that focus
on how the Christian ethos and embedded values of
the College are incorporated into the online learning
platform.

Conclusion
The purpose of this study was to evaluate the
distance education program of Avondale College
of Higher Education. The methodology used was
student focused in that it asked students to provide
their perceptions of the distance program through
questionnaires and focus groups. The research
particularly focused on eliciting views from students
about their learning experiences with the program.

While relational teaching and learning are
important in both face-to-face and distance units
(Bowers & Kumar, 2017; Chen, deNoyelles, Patton,
& Zydney, 2017; Martin, Wang, & Sadaf, 2018),
establishing professional relationships between
students and lecturers in distance units requires
more work on the part of the lecturers to overcome
the technological barriers. Finding ways to create
opportunities for meaningful student-to-student
interactions is important for high quality distance
units (Miner-Romanoff, McCombs, & Chongwony,
2017; Raguza & Crampton, 2014; Smidt et al.,
2017). These opportunities should satisfy the need
for human contact, yet also provide support for learning. Developing learning communities could be a powerful way to broaden the focus from providing learning support to fellow students to providing meaningful relationships which enhance learning at a deeper level (McDonald, 2014; Tarmizi, de Vreede, & Zigurs, 2006). Helping instructors to create learning communities is becoming a major focus of the professional development instructors receive.

This study represents the beginning of a plan to research the distance education students’ experiences at Avondale in a longitudinal manner; it is only the beginning of a longer process. Creating a continuous evaluation program is an important part of any distance education program.

In the future, the institution will continue to use the results of this study to develop professional training opportunities, and to evaluate the impact of that training. Eventually, this study needs to be repeated to assure that the College maintains a quality distance education program. While this study was conducted within a higher education institution, the data collection instruments could be easily modified and applied to other educational contexts, such as primary and secondary schools, to evaluate the efficacy of online courses and online course components from the perspective of students. Subsequently, findings of such studies have the potential to provide the foundation of a research-informed set of practical recommendations that could guide future course design and identify the requirements for evidence-based professional development of teaching staff.

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Developing learning communities could be a powerful way to broaden the focus from providing learning support to fellow students to providing meaningful relationships which enhance learning at a deeper level.

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David L. Bolton has been teaching at West Chester University since 1991. The courses and workshops he has taught include evaluation and measurement, distance education, research methods, statistics, and educational technology. His primary focus of research has been the power of educational technology to engage students in the learning process.