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Profile of a Fully Online Unit in an Australian Arts and Education Faculty

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Abstract

Australia's leading distance education provider, Deakin University, has a policy to ensure all graduates in most courses must successfully complete at least one wholly online unit. Historically, all distance education at Deakin University has been undertaken solely in print. Off-campus students normally receive a Set Text, a series of additional photocopied readings and a Study Guide providing assistance on how to navigate through each weekly topic. Some fully online units currently offered by the University replicate this approach, even though a distinct pedagogy is needed to ensure wholly online units truly enhance student learning.
This paper outlines the approach we adopted in developing *AIX 391 – Work Transitions in the 21st Century*, a wholly online unit designed to improve the capacity of Arts and Education students to identify viable career paths after they have graduated. The paper outlines the unit's rationale and development over a two-year period in adopting a student-centred approach to enhance learning outcomes, while exposing students to new and often challenging online technologies. The paper also highlights results from the Student Evaluation of Teaching and Learning surveys, which ranked the unit in the top 5% of all Arts and Education faculty units offered in Semester 2, 2008.

1. Deakin University's Fully Online Policy

As part of a broader move to enhance online education and the flexibility it provides for distance education students, Deakin University commenced a policy in 2004 requiring all face-to-face and distance education students to successfully complete a wholly online unit prior to graduation. As Holt and Challis (2007) indicate, the original policy defined a wholly online unit in 'quite detailed and proscriptive terms', with all teaching, resources and communication between students and teaching staff to occur to through the University's learning management system. Since 2004, most courses offered by the University have developed at least one fully online elective unit. However, despite this proscriptive requirement, an investigation by Holt and Challis (2007) indicated that three years after the policy was implemented several 'different models of developing and teaching wholly online units' within the University could be identified. The diverse range of approaches in developing wholly

online units is arguably a symptom of the considerable discretion given to individual lecturers in compiling and delivering their unit content to face-to-face and distance learning students.

All units offered at Deakin University must have at least a 'basic' or 'extended' online presence, which tends to vary according to the Unit Chair's personal preferences, technical capabilities and the demands within the course being taught. All online content delivery is conducted through a centralised learning management system, which is a customised variant of Blackboard's WebCT platform called Deakin Studies Online (DSO). Each student and staff member receives access to a separate DSO site for each unit they undertake or administer in each semester. DSO is essentially a document repository system, allowing lecturers to upload word documents or powerpoint slides, to conduct automatically assessed online assessments such as quizzes and to add links to other digital programs to which the University subscribes, such as Elluminate Live (eLive) and iLecture. Most units with a 'basic' online presence provide students with access to word or powerpoint summaries of lecture material, along with conventional forms of online assessment such as gradable discussion threads or short quizzes designed to test student knowledge of core issues in the unit curriculum (Byrnes and Ellis, 2006). An 'extended' online presence generally includes links to audio lectures or television documentaries streamed through the iLecture facility, fortnightly synchronous discussion sessions through eLive and more complex assessment tasks such as the development of a portfolio requiring students to complete and upload responses to incremental tasks over the course of a semester of study. Just as individual lecturers have considerable discretion in the content of their face-to-face teaching, this approach to online learning ensures Unit Chairs retain a similar discretion in terms of how DSO is used for each unit.

Although the University's policy for developing fully online units has been firmly implemented, there has been resistance by many academic staff towards the potential for online learning to enhance the educational experiences of students. In the Faculty of Arts and Education, the shift to substantial or wholly online learning is often seen to undermine standards of intellectual rigour, which are traditionally based on the development of critical thinking, research and writing skills derived largely from the use and interpretation of printed text. There is also a fear that wholly online assessments are likely to produce a marked increase in student dishonesty or cheating (Lanier, 2006), which in turn is seen to undermine general standards of academic integrity. In addition, while the University's online policies are committed to enhancing student flexibility and innovation in online learning (Deakin University, 2008), staff development relating to new forms of online technology is generally voluntary or undertaken on a 'needs basis' only. When viewed alongside the considerable variation offered by the three modes of 'basic', 'extended' and 'wholly' online curriculum delivery, there is ultimately great diversity within and across courses in terms of the amount of online content provided to students, the degree of online engagement students can expect from each Unit Chair and the overall development of their online capabilities during their undergraduate degrees. Finally, innovative staff interested in using new technologies for teaching and learning tend to feel confined by the technical restrictions associated with the DSO platform and look for other means to enhance curriculum delivery. This might mean resorting to activities designed to enhance student engagement through social software platforms such as *Facebook*, *Second Life* or other independently developed websites. Many

distance education students currently use these platforms for social purposes, so their adoption for teaching and learning activities is merely an extension of their current online activities. The effect, however, is to sidestep the use of the University's preferred learning management system, and thus widen the gap between those lecturers who are keen to use new and innovative technologies those who are not.
The implementation of Deakin University's online policy therefore confers considerable discretion to individual lecturers, disciplines or schools. This might mean that disciplines collaborate to develop a staggered approach to online curriculum development over the course of a three-year program, or simply leave the question of online development to the discretion of the individual lecturer. Concerns also emerge over the implications on staff workloads, the poor level of knowledge on the effectiveness of e-learning outcomes and the true flexibility of online learning given reduced levels of computer and internet access in remote parts of Australia. As such, most teaching staff resistant to embracing new technologies in distance education tend to either reassert the benefits of conventional face-to-face or print-based teaching pedagogies, or simply replicate this pedagogy in the online environment (Reeves, 2003). This type of thinking seems to characterise most tentative ventures into fully online unit delivery in Arts and Education. The only form of quality assurance in this context is the University's Student Evaluation of Teaching and Units surveys, which are conducted at the end of each semester for all units on offer. These surveys give students the opportunity to assess the quality of teaching and learning in each unit they undertake, however are a very imperfect measure of the quality of curriculum delivery for both face-to-face and distance students. However, there is no firm compliance mechanism to ensure ongoing staff development in cases where poor results for the use of online technology are consistently recorded (Hannon, 2008).

2. Background to *Work Transitions in the 21st Century*

A further complicating factor in quality educational delivery facing Arts and humanities faculties across Australia is the lack of defined career path in most conventional Arts disciplines such as sociology, history, anthropology, and to a lesser extent criminology (Schewndinger et al., 2002). Unlike fields such as law, medicine or social work where students undertake core learning alongside stringent professional accreditation and fieldwork requirements, Arts degrees are often seen to lack coherence, workplace relevance and the willingness to use convergent information technologies to enhance work integrated learning (Deans of Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities and Australian Learning and Teaching Council, 2008, pp. 24-25; Challis et al, 2005). According to the 2005 national Graduate Destination Survey, around 35% of Deakin University graduates in 'humanities' and 'other social sciences' had difficulty in finding full-time work in their preferred fields four months after graduation. This survey also indicates the employment rates for Deakin humanities students compared poorly with all other Victorian universities (Division of Student Life, 2007, pp. 4-5). As a consequence, the Division of Student Life at Deakin University investigated prospective employment paths relating to the fields of criminology, sociology, anthropology and history, by soliciting feedback from various public and private employers in urban and regional centres on their perspectives of the most appropriate graduate attributes relevant to the contemporary workplace.

Employers identified several limitations associated with the current skill-base of most Arts and humanities graduates. Advice to students included the need for improved levels of analytical thinking, the need to undertake internship or voluntary work opportunities in their preferred fields, the need to embrace principles of ongoing learning to recognise that an undergraduate degree is simply one step in the process of professional life, and a particular emphasis on the need for quantitative research skills, something largely absent in most Arts and humanities disciplines other than psychology and sociology. However, perhaps the most telling finding was that graduates applying for positions in government and research agencies often had little idea of how to write a compelling application for the position they were seeking. Employers viewed a poorly written job application, with lack of supporting references or work experience, as a sign of the candidate's inability to apply their analytical thinking skills to a fairly basic real-world task. In addition, applicants with exemplary university grades often knew little about the agencies they were targeting for a prospective career. Needless to say, this demonstrates to a prospective employer that the graduate has no real interest or commitment to the organisation they are targeting (see Division of Student Life, 2007, pp. 12-55).

This information was reinforced by a small survey of eighty-one undergraduate students majoring in the Arts and humanities at Deakin, which examined their perspectives of labour market opportunities in light of their undergraduate learning. The survey found that around 64% of students expressed considerable pessimism about their potential employability in their field of choice (Division of Student Life, 2007, pp. 56-57). Many of those in the remaining 36% had already undertaken some work experience or graduate recruitment activities on a voluntary basis while completing their degree. However, the most telling finding was that students attributed generic workplace skills and prior work experience as more important to their quest for employment than the discipline-based knowledge covered in their undergraduate studies. The survey highlighted a perceived lack of emphasis in Arts and humanities learning on issues considered central in professional working life, such as personality development, initiative, confidence, organisational and communication skills, professionalism, presentation, responsibility and commitment (Division of Student Life, 2007, pp. 57-58). The report therefore recommended students be given a clearer idea of the potential career paths and employers in their preferred fields from their first-year of study, an expansion of internship and guest lecturing initiatives in humanities fields and greater exposure to 'training and workshops on resume writing, addressing key selection criteria and responding to behavioural interview questions' (Division of Student Life, 2007, pp. 62-63).

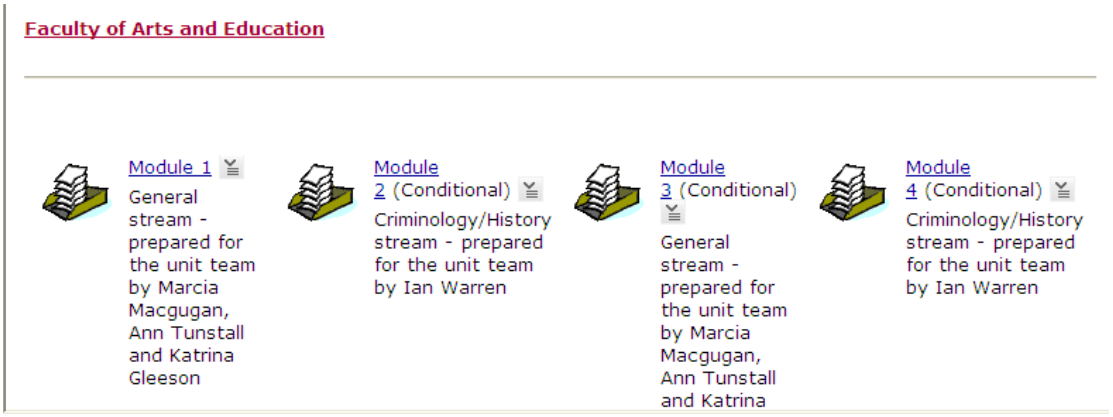
3. AIX 391 *Work Transitions in the 21st Century*

AIX391 is a one-credit point unit available only to final year students, which simultaneously aims to enhance the range of wholly online units available to Arts and humanities students, while improving their approach to strategically identifying and attaining their career objectives. The unit was intentionally developed as a wholly online offering to enhance its appeal amongst distance education students, who comprise up to 45% of the student body in fields such as anthropology, criminology and sociology at Deakin University. Many of these students are geographically dispersed, which means they are likely to have different career opportunities

compared with students based in urban centres. In addition, the partnership between the School of History Heritage and Society and the Division of Student Life offered a unique opportunity to forge a distinct online pedagogy specifically aimed at improving student knowledge and skills about career opportunities in the humanities without the risk of replicating a pre-existing teaching and learning approach dependant on printed material. Finally, the importance of advanced technological skills in the contemporary workplace helped to inform the development of various assessment tasks in this unit, with the aim of exposing students to emerging communication technologies currently used in workplace settings (Deakin University, 2008).

AIX391 consists of four modules in total. Two modules contain information and activities relating to generic workplace skills, and is a direct response to the concerns raised by employers and students in the Division of Student Life graduate employment report. Module 1 is linked to a Commonwealth Government website called 'My Future', which encourages students to think critically and reflectively about their career objectives, employment skills and the relevance of their undergraduate learning in their preferred career. Core components of the 'My Future' exercise are linked to collaborative discussion threads and two assessment tasks: a skills match quiz conducted through DSO, and a draft career plan, which becomes the foundation of a series of incremental assessment tasks throughout the remainder of the unit.

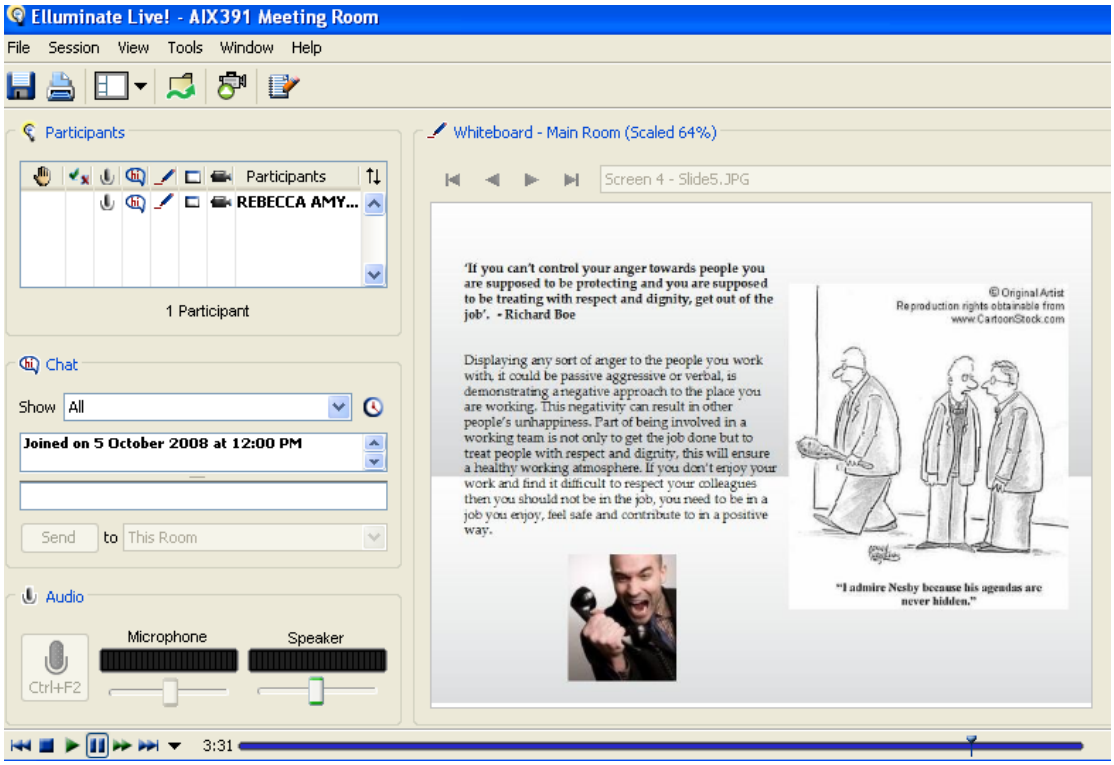
Figure 1. Layout of Four Modules for AIX391 in the DSO Platform



Module 3 builds on this material through a series of targeted activities and assessment tasks guiding students on the importance of periodically revising and updating their career plans in light of new and emerging opportunities in their respective fields. Tasks include various practical skills relating to preparing application letters, interview techniques and personal presentation. Each task is informed by reference to the initial 'My Future' exercise, and various Australian and international resources dealing with careers education benchmarking (see AGCAS, 2005). As part of both Modules 1 and 3, students are required to complete a series of non-assessable activities to guide them towards their final assessment piece, a 10 to 15 minute powerpoint presentation and accompanying voice recording undertaken through the eLive platform. This assessment task encourages each student to market themselves for the position of their choice by incorporating the various self analysis, audit and

career targeting skills examined in Modules 1 and 3. Significantly, it will be rare for distance education students to undertake any form of oral presentation during their undergraduate degrees. In the lead up to this major assessment task, students are required to complete two shorter digital presentations designed to enhance their competence and confidence with the eLive technology and recording oral presentations.

Figure 2. Sample eLive Recording (Semester 2, 2008)

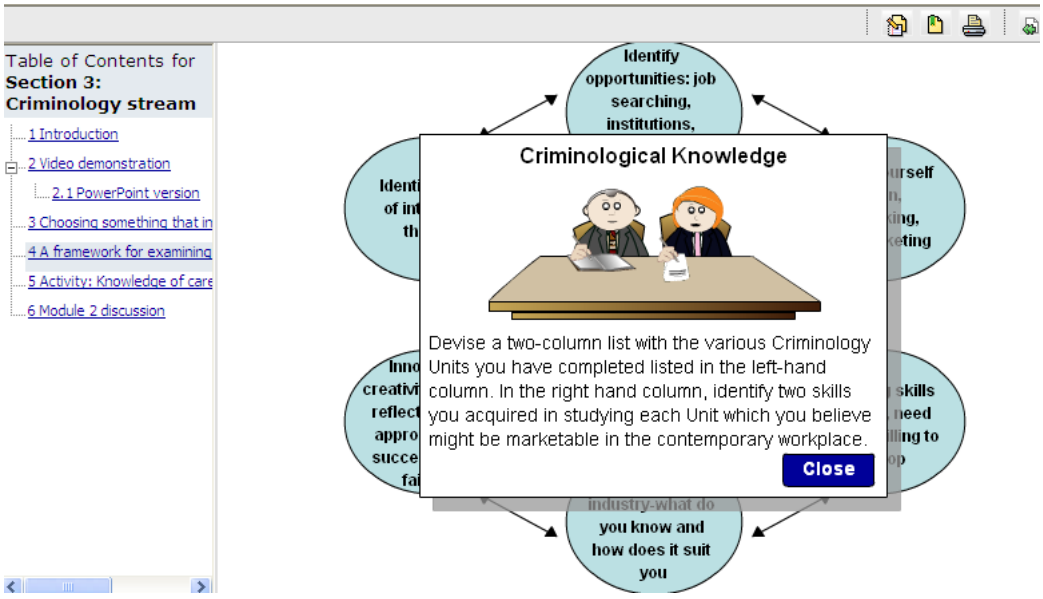


Modules 2 and 4 contain discipline specific content, which in the first two years of the unit's development was related to the field of criminology. The original aim was to encourage other humanities disciplines such as anthropology, sociology and history, to build their own content using the template of activities developed by criminology. Module 2 builds on the 'My Future' exercise, by encouraging students to reflect on how their prior learning in the field of criminology can be marketed to prospective employers at various public and private justice agencies at local, state, national or international level. Module 4 extends on this material and each of the components of Modules 1 and 3 in two ways. First, it provides students with a series of practical tasks highlighting the importance of professional 'networking' and engaging in voluntary work to help secure employment in local, national or international justice agencies. Second, students are required to critically examine several ethically and conceptually problematic scenarios associated with work in the justice field. Material in this section encourages an awareness amongst students that criminology is a discipline committed to helping the disadvantaged (Schwendinger et al, 2002), but is often plagued by practical and political issues which might stifle personal and professional career advancement, such as underfunding and the administration or implementation of contentious or unpalatable government policies. Throughout, the aim is to ensure this discipline specific content is targeted to the realities of day-to-

day working life in the justice field, while providing an applied focus for the generalist material canvassed in Modules 1 and 3.

Three features of AIX391 have informed the content development and delivery as a wholly online unit suitable for students studying by distance. First, the combination of generalist and discipline specific material is broad in scope, which ensures that regardless of their geographic locations, students can focus on local, state, national or international agencies suited to their own career aspirations. As such, we have been conscious to provide sufficient guidance on the diverse range of professions available in the field of criminology, and to link the instructional materials, topic activities and formal assessment tasks to the more generalist career guidance literature. This in turn creates a seamless link between the content of Modules 1 and 3 and the discipline-specific material in Modules 2 and 4.

Figure 3. Interactive Exercise on Criminology Career Planning



Second, the development team has been conscious to ensure that most content is interactive and is not dependent on printed text. Figure 3 illustrates the use of a diagram with pop up boxes containing an activity requiring students to audit the skills they believe they have acquired throughout their previous units of criminological study. In a conventional off-campus unit, this activity would simply appear as a printed instruction. Through the use of digital animation, students are more likely to engage with this activity and see its purpose in light of the unit objectives as a whole. This philosophy underpins many of the instructional elements of the unit's online content. Therefore, essay questions are supplemented by short video and audio streamed vignettes to prompt critical thought, discussion and research around a series of occupational dilemmas associated with criminology. Students are also provided with short desktop capture films on appropriate methods of searching for relevant Australian and international justice agencies to assist in establishing networking and voluntary fieldwork opportunities. Throughout, the goal has been to use the multi-media capabilities within DSO to enhance the level of intellectual sophistication and practical skills students acquire in this unit. This helps to make the unit both intellectually and technologically interesting (Muller et al., 2008).

Finally, each activity and assessment task provides an incremental step towards the two major pieces of assessment due on completion of the four unit Modules. This is a deliberate strategy to ensure students build an ongoing body of knowledge relating to each component of the unit. Table 1 outlines the assessment structure adopted in 2008. As students progress through each Module, they are steered through various activities and discussion threads, each of which tests their self-reflective capacities, knowledge and implementation of the curriculum in practice. Each activity builds on the curriculum content in an incremental way, and responses can be reworked into the formal assessment tasks. This ensures students understand and engage with the unit content in a step-by-step, theme-by-theme manner, not generally encouraged with a 50% essay and 50% examination assessment structure common to most humanities units at Deakin University. This assessment structure also provides students with ample opportunity before the major assessment tasks are due to master the technology associated with the DSO platform and the eLive recording system, while the range of assessment tasks provides limited burden on teaching staff in terms of grading and providing relevant feedback to students on their progress.

Table 1. Assessment for AIX 391, Semester 2, 2008

Assessment / Assignment		**Length**	**%**
1	eLive Introductory Assignment	5 minutes	5%
2	Skills match Exercise	Online quiz	5%
3	Draft Career Plan	2 pages	10%
4	Directed Assignment/ Interview with Discipline Expert	1000 words	20%
5	Decision Making - On-line career plan	6 pages	15%
6	Portfolio component 1: Written Mock Job Application: * covering letter * Resume * Evidence of meeting selection criteria	approx. 6 pages	20%
7	Discipline workplace exercise	Quiz	10%
8	Portfolio component 2: eLive presentation	10-15 mins	15%
			100%

In Semester 2 2007, the content for AIX391 was being developed as the unit was being delivered to students. As such, the synergies between the content in Modules 1 and 3 and the discipline specific content of Modules 2 and 4 lacked clarity, students and staff were somewhat confused by the burden of multiple assessment tasks and the level of overall student engagement appeared to be quite low. However, in 2008 the unit was extensively revised to overcome each of these difficulties. Teaching staff were also made more aware of their multiple roles as technologists, content and process facilitators, instructional designers, student counsellors and assessors, which all appear to be magnified as crucial functions in online distance education (Goodyear

et al, 2001). The success of these content changes is documented in Table 2, which demonstrates the comparative improvement in student evaluation survey results between the 2007 and 2008 offerings. Students completing the survey are required to provide a ranking from 1 to 5 indicating their level of agreement with each of the listed statements associated with the unit. The Arts and Education faculty target for all questions is an average of 3.8. In 2007, AIX391 met this target for six of the nine questions, but remained below the faculty average overall. In 2008, AIX391 exceeded the faculty target and the overall average for most units delivered in 'basic' or 'extended' online formats in all bar one question relating to the clarity of instructions on assessment tasks. Of particular importance are the scores of 4.5 and above for the quality of teaching, the quality of feedback and the quality of the online resources provided to students. The importance of these points in effective fully online learning was reinforced by the qualitative comments from the 2008 survey.

> Ian was very patient and tolerant especially of technical problems. I never felt uncomfortable approaching him with questions … he made the course less stressful and more enjoyable.

Table 2. Student Evaluation of Teaching and Units, AIX391, 2007 and 2008

Question	**2007 mean (faculty average in brackets)**	**2008 mean (faculty average in brackets)**
This unit was well taught	3.8 (3.9)	4.5 (3.96)
The course materials in this unit were of high quality	3.3 (3.82)	4.2 (3.92)
The workload in this unit was manageable	3.8 (3.96)	4.0 (3.98)
Requirements for completing the assessment tasks in this unit were clear	4.1 (3.82)	3.8 (3.9)
The teaching staff gave me helpful feedback	4.3 (3.91)	4.7 (3.97)
The library resources met my needs for this unit	3.17 (3.64)	4.0 (3.74)
I would recommend this unit to other students	3.8 (3.82)	4.3 (3.9)
The technologies used to deliver the online content in this unit performed satisfactorily	3.9 (3.79)	4.2 (3.87)
The on-line teaching and resources in this	3.6	4.67

unit enhanced my learning experience	(3.52)	(3.65)

A commitment to prompt, responsive and empathetic feedback on questions associated with technical problems and core curriculum content help to supplement the extensive technical development aimed at enhancing the student experience in this unit. The development team considered this combination of factors as crucial to the success of the wholly online approach, given the inevitable complexities we anticipated in encouraging students to master the compulsory eLive recording process. Most students had never encountered this recording technology before undertaking this unit. Despite the immense difficulties experienced by students when using this technology for the first short assessment task in week two, by the end of the unit students had stopped lodging complaints or reports of technical difficulties associated with eLive. This trend reinforces a growing body of research challenging the idea that today's cohorts of undergraduate students are digital natives (Kennedy et al, 2008), but also supports the idea that when forced to engage with new or challenging educational technologies, they will succeed if adequate support and encouragement is provided. Moreover, students valued the overall trajectory of the unit content as it 'prepares a person for the after uni life'.

Despite all of these benefits associated with AIX391, the ongoing survival of the unit remains contentious. In this paper, we argue that we have built a wholly online unit which simultaneously consolidates the learning students undertake in their undergraduate studies in criminology, several contemporary domestic and international developments in careers education, and provides a viable, responsive and effective template for other disciplines to engage in an innovative online multi-media pedagogy. As with any face-to-face or distance education offering, AIX391 clearly requires modifying in order to ensure the currency and relevance of its content. However, other humanities disciplines have been reluctant to engage either with the discipline-specific model we have provided with criminology, or with the concept of a task-oriented workplace unit. No disciplines, including criminology, are prepared to classify the unit as a recognised major for the Bachelor of Arts at Deakin University. Most regrettably, the School administering AIX391 has voted to have the unit suspended from offer in 2010 due to a lack of resources. The major argument justifying its suspension involved the high number of students from disciplines outside the School and faculty choosing this unit simply to satisfy the University's policy requiring the successful completion of a wholly online unit prior to graduation. In absence of any significant promotion of the unit amongst the humanities disciplines, it is understandable enrolment numbers from disciplines such as anthropology, sociology, history and even criminology remain low in 2009. However, perhaps more pertinent than these factors is the perception that wholly online learning somehow undermines the intellectual rigour associated with a humanities education. This very attitude is seen by various employers and Deakin students to compromise the employability of Deakin University graduates (Division of Student Life, 2007), but also appears to be closely linked to the reticence associated with wholly online learning as a mandatory policy and as an emerging educational tradition. Perhaps only generational change can alter this perspective. Nevertheless, we believe that through a process of trial and error, with few resources, an innovative development team and a critical, informed approach to curriculum development, we have produced a viable model for wholly online learning that warrants further consideration due to its

capacity to engage undergraduates studying by distance in a meaningful, reflective, insightful and technologically sophisticated way.

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