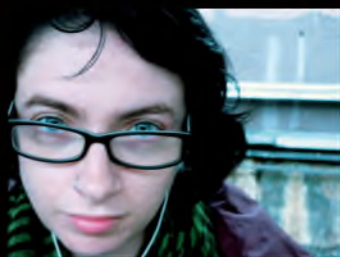


# EEI... ENERGISE, ENTHUSE, INSPIRE



**Elizabeth Caplice**

## External study: is it working like it should?

Let me start with a blatant disclaimer. I loathe external study. It does not suit my learning methods, or the way I think, nor is it the best way for me

to engage with ideas. I thrive on community, and face to face communication. When I don't understand something, I am happy to ask questions until I do. For me, mediating this questioning through email seems to impede my understanding of the material in a way I can't quite work out.

I want to talk about the move towards external library and information studies courses in universities across Australia. There are clear and obvious advantages; you can

***"... what is lost when face-to-face communication is substituted with optional forums, and pages of notes to read when you feel like it?"***

study from home and outside of standard university hours, and it clearly offers you flexibility that internal study cannot. As a student and employee having to balance work and study, the capacity to study to your own personal timetable gives you far more options for fitting your education into an already busy life.

However, should flexibility be the key focus of education? What is sacrificed when people turn from the enforced discipline of internal, attendance-based study? And what is lost when face-to-face communication is substituted with optional forums, and pages of notes to read when you feel like it, interspersed with the occasional learning activity?

I studied the first eight units of my Masters through internal studies. Despite the subjects being challenging and life getting in the way, as it does whilst studying and working, I managed to keep my grades at an even, comfortable level. Since moving to external study my grades have consistently diminished. I know from speaking to many other students who have been struggling through a Master's program that it is not just me who has had grades drop – it seems to be a fairly consistent experience.

What are the implications for the profession, if the only way of gaining the skills and knowledge to do your job is a method which does not best help you learn? When grades - a vital reflection of student comprehension - drop, surely this is indicative that perhaps the students are not learning as effectively as they were previously. I understand that some people do thrive in the external learning environment, and I applaud and respect them.

However, some individuals, such as myself, thrive in the traditional internal teaching environment.

I study externally not by choice, but because I am unable to study internally without leaving my job as a librarian and moving interstate to live near one of the very few universities still offering a course internally. The move away from internal and external courses being offered simultaneously or in 'mixed modes', where students can pick and choose between listening to some lectures online and attending some tutorials in person and others in chat rooms, to exclusively offering programs through external studies takes away a really valuable opportunity for students to choose. I am aware that there are a variety of complex reasons behind the move away from internal studies in academia but I still think the broader implications of the move to external studies as standard for library and information management training need to be seriously and continually evaluated and considered, in order to assist all students with all their different learning needs and skills.

I should also note this is the perspective of a so-called 'digital native'. I am very familiar with using new and emerging technology as ways of engaging with ideas and connecting with others. It has been an important part of my learning and educational experience since the beginning of my secondary education. And yet, the experience of using a forum for communicating and discussing ideas with other students has never even come close for me to the experience and learning opportunities afforded in a tutorial, where readings are discussed, questions are asked, exercises are marked, and other students present their learning.

The lecture presentation format may not be the best way to learn for everyone but it is a way I had grown accustomed to over four and a half years full time internal studies, and it has been a method that has supported me through difficult concepts numerous times. I remember fondly the experience of sitting in lecture theatres, having someone explain a concept I'd not understood before from a slightly different angle and then suddenly understanding.

Being an informed, educated and passionate information professional, equipped with tools gained from learning is such an important part of a vibrant profession. I want to see students enthused by their study and for library and information studies education to reflect the passionate and vibrant nature of the profession.

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