

## Chapter 91

# Expectations, Experiences, and Preferences of Students in a Dual Mode Program: A Thematic Analysis

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### ABSTRACT

*While online-only programs are increasingly common, many universities today offer dual mode programs with both online and on campus cohorts undertaking the same program at the same time. This results in students having a range of experiences along a continuum from fully online study to a mix of online and face-to-face study. This research aimed to develop an understanding of preferences, expectations, and experiences of students enrolled in a dual mode postgraduate coursework program in Australia. Outcomes are presented in themes along with rich description and explanation that capture different facets of recurring singular ideas delineating the experiences of students in relation to their learning in a flexible dual mode. The research findings provide insight into the student experience of online study as well as the broader experience of study in a dual mode cohort.*

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Many tertiary education institutions today offer programs on campus, online, at a distance, or in a blend of different modes. Dual mode programs are programs that have both an on campus and an on-line cohort undertaking the same program at the same time. This results in students having a range of experiences along a continuum from fully online study, to a mix of online and face-to-face study. This type of delivery provides students with greater online engagement while they still take advantage of direct interaction and communication with instructors and peers (Anderson, Sutton, & Gergen, 2014). Other benefits of such a learning mode have been acknowledged, including travel cost savings (Michael, 2012), reducing burdensome relocation (O'Shea, Stone, & Delahunty, 2015), and allowing combination of paid employment and family commitments (Stone, O'Shea, May, Delahunty, & Partington, 2016). As this mode makes the most of both online and on campus learning, it is anticipated that it will gradually replace single mode learning (Daniel, 2012). There is a body of research exploring the perceptions and experiences of students in distance learning, online learning, face-to-face learning, and the mix of these modes. For example, the literature touches on the issue of social interaction and independent learning among distance students (Andeson, Upton, Dron, Malone, & Poelhuber, 2015), student satisfaction and experiences in online programs (Blackmon & Major, 2012; Bolliger & Wasilik, 2012), and the variations in student experiences of online and face-to-face classes (Okech, Barner, Segoshi, & Carney, 2014). However, there is little empirical research regarding experiences of students in a dual mode program, where students are invited to move fluidly across modes of engagement, from week to week, without altering the enrolment.

This article reports on a study that sought to explore students' expectations of study in a dual mode cohort, both before enrolment, and after experiencing the approaches to teaching used across in the program. It also sought to audit the specific approaches to learning and teaching used across the program, and to explore students' experiences and preferences with regard to those approaches. The teaching team sought to understand whether they were under or over delivering compared to students' expectations, whether expectations shifted over time, and where they should put their energy in terms of making improvements.

The project involved three sub-studies: an audit of approaches used by educators across the program; an online questionnaire open to all students; and in-depth semi-structured interviews with current students. This article reports primarily on a thematic analysis of the interview data, with some supporting data from the questionnaire. The thematic analysis presented may be used by instructors working in dual mode, blended and online programs to inform their understanding of how students experience dual mode learning where extreme flexibility in mode of learning is a core characteristic of the learning environment.

## **About the Programs**

This research was conducted as a case study of two coursework Masters programs in Library and Information Studies at a university in Australia. The research was initially shaped around a single program, however, a new version of the program was introduced before data collection was undertaken. As the program content and approach to teaching remained largely unchanged despite the program being re-shaped for the new program, both cohorts were included in the study.

The program was first offered as a dual mode program – that is, simultaneously for both an on campus and online cohort – in 2008, providing students with what the teaching team refer to as 'extreme flex-

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