

Teaching and learning on the margins

Andrea Dodo-Balu
Curtin University

This presentation is based on my recently completed doctoral research which looked at the experiences of two groups who are among the least visible in academia, namely non-traditional students who study online and casual teaching academics who deliver online programs. The aim of the research was to develop a better understanding of their experiences and to bring their voices into discussions on higher education teaching and learning. This qualitative case study involved a small number of students and tutors who had participated in a particular online, first year unit in recent Open Universities Australia study periods. Qualitative research methods, including in-depth interviews, were utilised within an instrumental case study framework. Triangulation with larger, external data sources served to underpin the findings. These suggest that while non-traditional students can experience positive and transformative learning through online study, online tutors are negatively affected by their casual status. Empowerment was an outcome of participation in the unit for the majority of the students who were involved in the study. Conversely, the tutors who participated in the study reported feelings of disempowerment. Findings from the tutor participants indicated that their experience was constrained within a marketised and competitive higher education environment where, paradoxically, teaching quality is of crucial importance yet casual teachers are marginalised and rendered invisible.

The implications of the mutually beneficial relationship between universities and non-traditional students, and the effectiveness of online teaching and learning in this context will be explored with participants. Findings demonstrated that casual tutors are an online resource that is highly valued by students. Therefore, feedback will also be sought on how universities can better acknowledge the integral place of casual academic teachers and begin to problematise the dichotomy between casual and other academic staff.