• Synopsis

Students are entering tertiary education with increasingly diverse educational backgrounds and requisite skills. Charles Sturt University has a particularly diverse student profile with more than 70% of students studying by distance education and more than 50% of students represented in equity categories (low SES, rural/remote, disability, ATSI). Many are also first generation University students, have experienced educational disadvantage, or have had significant gaps in their education. These issues will be magnified as a result of the Bradley Review of Higher Education (2008) that recommends broader access targets of University degrees for 40% of 25 to 34-year-olds. In order to reach these targets and to ensure equitable access, participation and success for all students, it is critical that appropriate academic support be provided to facilitate a successful first year experience at University.

Study Link is a nationally recognised, award winning enabling program which has demonstrated a sustained capacity to positively influence the first year experience of students at Charles Sturt University. The Study Link program consists of eighteen self paced, non credit bearing subjects aimed to build confidence, skills and knowledge in a supportive environment prior to commencing University study. Designed to enhance the first year experience by facilitating students’ academic transition to University study, the program is free of charge to Commonwealth supported students. Since its inception in 1998, Study Link has had over 24,000 enrolments.

Study Link is delivered by distance education and offered throughout the year, with students encouraged to complete subjects between University enrolment and commencement of their first academic session. A core of generic transition subjects is complemented by discipline specific subjects that have been written to closely align with credit subjects with high attrition rates.

A guiding factor in the development of Study Link was to ensure equivalent opportunities for University preparation were available to distance education students as to those studying on campus. Increasing numbers of students are mature aged and already in the workforce, so the ability to develop skills for successful study whilst maintaining existing responsibilities is critical. The Study Link program in this respect is a social justice initiative.

Study Link has been rigorously evaluated and provides a benchmark for the sustainable and scalable delivery of high quality University preparation programs. Student and staff feedback, ongoing participation and success rates point to the success of Study Link in increasing skills, knowledge and confidence, and positively influencing the first year experience.

• a. Distinctiveness, coherence and clarity of purpose

**Distinctiveness** While many universities provide enabling programs, few, if any offer comprehensive programs to support the first year experience and academic transition that are accessible to all students, as is the case with Study Link. The many universities that offer on campus delivery of enabling or preparation programs effectively limit the potential cohort to only those who are in a position to physically attend campus for the required time. In most instances this is not possible for students who intend to study by distance education, or who are in paid work or have family commitments. Characteristics that have contributed to the success and distinctiveness of the Study Link program include: flexible program delivery, breadth, administration, availability and individual subject learning designs.

**Program delivery:** The Study Link program is distinctive in that it may be studied by distance education, which allows students to combine existing commitments with skill development and preparation for the first year of University study. It is also unique in that it is offered continuously throughout the year, so students may enrol at their point of need and when their motivation for learning is at its highest. The following student comment is typical in terms of appreciation of online availability and accessibility:

"It was great that it was available online and during the Christmas break"

Study Link subjects are short and manageable (13 – 40 hours) and self paced, allowing students flexibility to manage their learning in conjunction with existing commitments while having the full support of a facilitator who is readily available to every student. Deputy Vice Chancellor (Administration) Professor Lyn Gorman, highlights the significance of the distinctive program design with the following comments:
"It is very likely that the Rudd Government's participation targets, following the Bradley Review, will highlight challenges for many students of making the transition to university. The Study Link team has provided a scalable model with demonstrably successful outcomes – a program that has now attracted the attention of other universities. Importantly, the team has developed a means of meeting the needs of both prospective distance education (including mature-aged) and on-campus students."

The potential pitfalls of studying by distance education are well known. Feelings of isolation, loneliness and lack of motivation are reasons commonly cited for lack of persistence among those choosing this mode of study (McInnerney & Roberts, 2004; Ludwig-Hardman & Dunlap 2003). These issues can be further magnified for those commencing study without adequate preparation. By participating in an enabling program via distance education, students not only develop skills for studying via distance education, but also build important links with fellow students and the University community. Flexible delivery of enabling subjects provides students with real-life and authentic exposure to what learning via distance is really like, setting realistic expectations and the foundation for a positive first year experience. Distance education is an integral component of Charles Sturt University (CSU) and by no means a lesser experience for students than studying on campus. The development of the Study Link program as one that is accessible by distance education sends a strong message regarding the value placed on this mode of delivery and the students engaged in learning in this manner. The following student comments demonstrate that this intention is one that is acknowledged and appreciated by students:

- "Thank you for making this accessible to me. I think CSU has done a wonderful job...it definitely enables distance education students to feel that they are an integral part of the University."
- "Distance education can be an isolating experience. The support and encouragement which the staff offer, and continue to offer once the connection through Study Link is complete is phenomenal."
- "I shall always be indebted to you – thank you"

Flexible delivery of enabling programs is also increasingly attractive to students studying on campus, with approximately 55% of full-time commencing students at CSU balancing paid work with their studies (Krause, Hartley, James, & McInnis, 2005).

Program breadth: Study Link is distinctive in the breadth and diversity of subjects on offer to support the first year experience and academic transition to University. Eighteen subjects are currently included in the Study Link program. These include those that cover generic skills such as Skills for Learning Online, those that prepare students for entry into a particular discipline such as Transition to Policing Studies and those that have been designed to specifically prepare students to succeed in high attrition degree subjects such as Mathematics for Calculus. The full subject listing is as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Subject</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Transition to Tertiary Study</td>
<td>Transition to Nursing Studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic Skills Development</td>
<td>English Skills for Academic Writing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skills for Learning Online</td>
<td>Foundation Mathematics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mathematics for Agriculture</td>
<td>Transition to Policing Practice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mathematics for Calculus</td>
<td>Transition to Tertiary Study for Indigenous Students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introductory Chemistry</td>
<td>Preparation for Studying Business</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introductory Physics</td>
<td>Preparation for the Sciences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introductory Science for Nurses</td>
<td>Preparation for Studies in Information Technology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introductory Statistics for the Social Sciences</td>
<td>Stepping into Statistics</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
"The subject taught me about academic writing, the most important aspect in assignment writing. It also taught me about resources at CSU...it gave me practice on online communication, accessing important forum, EASTS assignment submission and confidence in using my computer which has impressed my teenage children, who now ask for my assistance. I am better prepared for the 4 years part time study after doing the Study Link course."

Program availability: Study Link subjects are optional, but are available to any students accepting an offer to CSU. Those with Commonwealth Support places may enrol free of charge. Study Link is also available on a fee paying basis for any students wishing to develop skills and confidence in preparation for study at any University. No differentiation is made between CSU students and non CSU students in terms of subject materials, facilitation or interaction. The following comment from a prospective student exemplifies the importance of programs such as Study Link to allow students to 'test the waters' of tertiary study:

"I had always regretted not going to Uni and felt I was too out of 'study' shape to start now. Study Link has provided the opportunity to test myself and see not only how I would perform academically but how I would fit study into my lifestyle. After completing one study link subject, I am now moving onto my second and will be applying for a Bachelor of Business degree to further my career. Study Link has been a fantastic stepping stone which has enabled me to face my fear of study and given me the drive to seek out career opportunities I had not considered before."

Program Design: Study Link is completely integrated with all CSU academic and administrative systems so that students experience identical enrolment, assessment submission and learning environment conditions well before they are faced with the cognitive load of their degree subjects. All Study Link subjects are situated within CSU Interact, CSU's online learning environment which allows a constructivist approach to learning. Immersed in CSU Interact, students encounter an authentic and engaging learning environment within which they access their learning materials and resources. The learning design supports participation in learning activities that involve students in communication, cooperation and collaborative learning with other students, facilitating the active construction of knowledge. The use of online forums in all subjects encourages peer-to-peer support and collaboration, while assessment schemes have been designed to provide early and formative feedback to students, providing early opportunities for success, a significant issue in student motivation and ensuring a positive first year experience.

The Study Link subject, Skills for Learning Online, is one of the original generic subjects intended to introduce students to the CSU online environment. As the University fully utilises online technology, familiarity and confidence in this environment are critical if the transition to the first year is to be a smooth one. Skills for Learning Online provides students with the opportunity to develop competencies in peer-to-peer communication and collaboration, skills highly relevant to 21st century learning and working environments.

Jonassen (1999, p. 9) recommends a technology-rich learning environment in which students assume ownership of their learning: "Online technologies should be used to keep students active, constructive, collaborative, intentional, complex, contextual, conversational, and reflective". The Study Link program takes up this challenge by not only introducing technologies to students, but also allowing them to learn with and even interrogate technologies situated within the online environment. By employing the array of learning and communication tools available within CSU Interact, the learning and teaching activities purposefully guide students towards meaningful online communication, interaction and engagement. This allows them to experience a shared learning space (an online learning community), as well as providing them with the basis of a personal learning space. Learning activities are designed to promote both social and structured interactions among learners, through synchronous and asynchronous contact (chat, forum), reflective exercise (blog as a learning journal), collaborative activity (wiki as joint construction of text) and brief or extensive social or informational exchanges (various discussion tools).

Figure 1 below illustrates the array of tools available in a Study Link subject. These tools and the look and feel of all Study Link subjects are identical to those students encounter in a CSU degree, providing important consistency and opportunities for skill and confidence building.
The wiki tool is used within Skills for Learning Online as an opportunity for students to jointly construct text. Learning activities scaffold a student through the basics of what a wiki is how this particular tool works. On the whole, though, students are encouraged to be experimental and innovative in their explorations of this particular communication tool. In a recent subject offering it was particularly encouraging to see just how far students were prepared to be innovative with the wiki, which was something many of them had not experienced previously. As Figure 2 shows below, not only did the students actively participate in the assessment activity using a wiki, they took the exercise a step further and established a number of self-interest wikis within the subject site.
As the following student feedback attests, the opportunity to practice skill development in a safe and supportive environment cannot be measured:

"Thanks again for putting this course together (I don’t think I would have survived DE without it)... On the holidays I am going to try and set up a wiki for my daughter and her friends; if it wasn’t for this course I wouldn’t of [sic] known they exist".

Coherence and clarity of purpose

**Program aims and objectives.** The aim of the Study Link program is to enable students to develop foundational skills, knowledge and understandings in preparation for tertiary study. The objectives of the Study Link program are:

- to allow students to make informed decisions as to their current level of readiness for tertiary study;
- to provide students with the opportunity to sample tertiary study in a supportive and non-threatening learning environment;
- to provide experience of learning in an online environment;
- to provide a program that is based on and provides opportunities to develop the expected generic skills, attributes and values of CSU graduates;
- to increase opportunities for participation by persons from groups who are under-represented in higher education;
- to provide a fee-free program to students who qualify;
- to support improved retention rates and academic progress; and
- to provide a program that aligns with the strategic direction of the University.

It is well demonstrated that Study Link meets the objectives it has set. This is supported by enrolment figures, student feedback and evaluation, and university completion rates (described in detail in the next section). The feedback regarding the clarity and coherence of the program is also well supported by independent reviews. In the recent external evaluative review of Study Link conducted by an independent consultant from Monash University (Onsman, 2008), the following observations were noted in terms of program objectives:

- “There is little doubt that according to participating students the program is facilitating them to achieve its objectives. The comparative retention and completion rates support their collective judgment” (p. 33)
- “There is a clear, cohesive and coherent alignment between the objectives and the curriculum content” (p. 34).

Systematic approach to coordination and implementation: Study Link’s coordinated and systematic approach ensures its ongoing sustainability and effectiveness. Study Link began over a decade ago as an initiative within Student Services and was administered completely within the Division. However, the fast uptake by students and the clear potential for expansion meant it was sensible to mainstream the program into existing organizational structures, including approval and administrative processes, educational design, and production and despatch and evaluation systems. Study Link is now considered ‘core’ activity rather than an exception ensuring that processes and systems are not duplicated. While this level of mainstreaming ensures high levels of quality control and organisational efficiencies, it also provides important consistency for students with regard to University processes and learning packages, leading to an enhanced student experience from the moment they commence study at CSU. Since 2005, Study Link has self funded a general staff position to administer the program, ensuring the highest levels of consistency in program coordination and implementation. It is this commitment to quality and continuous improvement that has allowed for the sustained growth of the program over a number of years and ensures it continues to meet the needs of CSU students and the organization.

* b. Influence on student learning*

Since its inception in 1998, more than 24,000 students have enrolled in Study Link; consequently it has strongly influenced student learning and the first year experience of students at CSU.

**Targeting identified needs:** There is wide agreement that student preparedness impacts greatly on the first year experience (Krause et al, 2005; Yorke & Longden, 2006). The Study Link program aims to respond to this identified need, but does so within the CSU context which is unique in many respects. Given most students at CSU study by distance education and are expected to utilise the online environment to do so, preparing students for success in this type of learning design concurrently with supporting key skill development was seen as critical to ensuring a smooth academic transition within the first year. In addition to supporting skill development in the general areas
such as study skills and grammar, the Study Link program has worked closely with the CSU Faculty to ensure that the program also meets discipline specific needs. As a result, degree subjects that typically have high attrition have been identified (e.g., physics and chemistry) and targeted Study Link subjects have been developed to support these needs. CSU-specific needs have also been identified through action research projects (Gibb, Hamilton, Latham, Manners, & McKinney, 2003) and have given rise to Study Link subjects that support particular cohorts of students such as the subject, Transition to Nursing Studies.

Influence on student learning and outcomes: The outcomes for students completing Study Link show an extremely positive effect on their first year experience. Student feedback has consistently reported increases in the areas of skills, confidence and knowledge – all essential to student success in University study.

Confidence: Study Link specifically aims to build student confidence, inspiring students to learn and go on to achieve success in their University studies. The following student comments gathered during the subject evaluation process are strikingly concurrent and support this view:

- "I was a bit daunted [but the subject] built confidence"
- "I had hardly taken any science or maths at high school and was apprehensive about my ability to grasp the material... Study Link provided me with not only a background in chemistry and its cousin maths, but also doused my fear of both... I now feel confident I will cope well"
- "It had been a long time since I finished school but Study Link gave me a great deal of confidence and advice on how to tackle my subjects"
- "I am sorry I didn't do this course [Study Link] when I began earlier... I nearly chicked the whole thing in [Uni] with discouragement... anyone entering University would benefit from this information [Study Link] greatly"

In his evaluative review of Study Link Onsman (2008) supports the belief that students identified and valued the increase in confidence as an outcome of the Study Link program:

- "Students are sure that the confidence gained in the Study Link subjects has carried over into their undergraduate work – and continues to be extremely beneficial to their ongoing success." (p. 42).
- "It is apparent that students consistently report that they have found Study Link to be of value, that it has a positive impact both in terms of content and skills, and as mechanism for instilling confidence. This is the highest commendation." (p. 68)

Skills and knowledge: Both students and staff report increases in skills and knowledge as a result of Study Link participation. The following student comments were collected during subject evaluations:

- "I had not done maths since high school and credit this course (Study Link) with helping me to achieve distinctions"
- "I completed the Study Link statistics course... I found it invaluable and would not have passed Business Statistics with out it."
- "As a student with no chemistry or physics background being able to do the introductory courses [Study Link] provided invaluable knowledge for my Wine Science subjects"

Staff too, see the great value of Study Link in terms of skills development. Subject Coordinator of Study Link subject, English Skills for Academic Writing, Sandra Fisher, reflects on the improvement she sees as students progress through the subject:

"As students progress through this Study Link subject they start to understand the building blocks of language which support effective communication. They learn the skills to effectively use these building blocks according to the context in which communication takes place, in this case, writing at University. It is clearly evident, through the progressive improvement in written tasks, that students are applying the skills and knowledge they have gained in studying this subject."

CSU Lecturer in Business Statistics, Helen Barton, also acknowledges the influence of Study Link completion on students' abilities:

"It has been my experience that the students who complete the Study Link Stepping into Statistics course, prior to commencing the credit bearing Business Statistics subject, appear more confident in their approach, as some of the technical language has been demystified. They are less afraid to tackle the algebraic components of the course as they have been exposed to them in the preparatory course. In particular, mature age students who have not
worked in the mathematical area for a long time find that Study Link alleviates a fear they have of "not being able to do it".

**Program evaluation:** The Study Link program is rigorously and systematically evaluated on many fronts as part of a commitment to continuous improvement. This evaluation also provides the opportunity to gather evidence as to the impact of Study Link on student learning and the overall student experience. All subjects within the Study Link program participate in the formal University Wide Online Evaluation of Subjects Scheme. Formal student feedback collected by CSU's Evaluation Unit from 5 subjects over 9 trimesters demonstrates that on average, students strongly agree (6) that the subjects stimulated their learning and the quality of teaching assisted their learning (see graphs below where 1 = very strongly disagree and 7 = very strongly agree).

Study Link has proven to have an enormous influence on student learning and their experience of University, with students directly attributing the program with increases in skills and knowledge. A longitudinal evaluation study of the Study Link subject, Skills for Learning Online (SSS003), was carried out through a Committee for University Teaching and Staff Development (CUTSD) evaluation grant in 2000. Students who had completed Skills for Learning Online were surveyed regarding the long term benefits of completing the subject. 132 responses were received and the results are summarised in the following table.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Strongly disagree/ disagree</th>
<th>Strongly agree/agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Completing SSS003 increased my confidence in using the online environment</td>
<td></td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Completing SSS003 increased my general self confidence in relation to commencing my first semester of study in my course at CSU</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>93%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My skills level has increased as a result of studying SSS003</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>99%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The skills learnt in SSS003 have assisted me in my first year of my course at CSU</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>95%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall do you believe that studying SSS003 was of value to you in the rest of your course</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>96%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The evidence of the long term value of students completing this subject has ensured that ongoing funding be allocated to subject development in order to ensure continued complete alignment with the online learning and teaching environment of the University, including introducing students to additional online learning and teaching tools as they become available. As a result of the evidence gathered in the CUTSD evaluation and ongoing subject evaluations, Skills for Learning Online formed a major component of the awareness and education strategy that accompanied the introduction of a new online learning and teaching environment at CSU in 2008.

In addition to systematic internal evaluation of each subject within the program, to ensure continuous improvement, an external, independent evaluation of the program as a whole was commissioned in 2008. The evaluative report by Associate Professor Andrys Onsman from Monash University was very positive and stated:

*"There is little doubt that overall the Study Link program is working well according to the criteria used in this review. It has been shown to be successful as both a generic bridging program and as a specific or discipline tied context. The University and Student Services are to be warmly congratulated." (p.68)*
c. Breadth of impact

The benefits of the Study Link program to students, and in turn the University are widespread, with more than 24,000 having benefitted from the program since it began over a decade ago. The opportunity for students to develop essential skills, knowledge and confidence prior to commencing University assists the academic transition to University, in turn facilitating a positive first year experience. Study Link has become an integral component of the student academic support program available at CSU, providing tangible and widespread benefits to students, the organisation, the higher education sector and the community in general.

Benefits to students: Student feedback has indicated wide ranging benefits with many commenting generally on the positive benefits from completing the Study Link program:

- "If I did not begin my study with Study Link, I would be disadvantaged and behind in my current studies. The Study Link courses are exceptional for older learners returning to study after a break, the course are easy to follow with expert instruction on what is required. I would recommend Study Link to any student wishing to achieve success in study."
- "I would definitely say that the Study Link course provided me with skills to ensure I achieve my degree and also confidence to continue"
- "With the Study Link subjects I was completely prepared for my University studies. Thank you"

Student retention: Study Link has also been shown to have a direct effect on students' persistence and ability to succeed at tertiary study. In his evaluative review of the Study Link program, Onsman (2008) states:

"students who move into undergraduate programs by way of Study Link achieve on average the same as standard entry students. Given that the pool of potential students from which Study Link draws its participants are generally less confident of being able to complete a degree, the statistics are positively remarkable." (p. 73)

Students support this view, with many directly attributing the Study Link program to their progress and success in their degree:

- "Having just set my first exam ... I would definitely say that the Study Link course provided me with the skills to ensure I achieve my degree."
- "I managed to get a Distinction in QBM117. ... I attribute this to the Study Link subject that I had done immediately prior to the main subject."
- "Had I not completed Study Link Maths, I would not have coped with CHM 108, which I have just completed this last semester, with DI and HD assignment grades!"

Student attrition: Onsman's evaluative report (2008) also found evidence that completion of Study Link has a positive effect on student attrition rates, finding that non-Study Link students abandon their studies at an average rate of 28.9% while those completing Study Link attrited at the rate of 26.2%.

Benefits to staff: Any program or initiative that affects students has a flow-on effect to CSU staff. Providing an enabling program to better prepare students, allows staff to prepare teaching and learning activities that assume students have a basic level of preparedness for university study. Associate Dean, Faculty of Education, Associate Professor Ken Dillon supports the benefits of the Study Link program for staff of CSU:

"The Study Link program has been of enormous benefit to the Faculties of CSU by assisting students to better prepare for University study. In particular, Study Link has demonstrated how the range of commencing student abilities and experiences, which have become increasingly diverse over time, can be effectively catered for through the program. Students' academic preparedness is critical to a positive first year experience and the ability of students to undertake such a program by distance education is of great significance to our University where Distance Education is the most common mode of study"

Benefits to the institution: The Study Link program began in 1998 with 457 enrolments in 6 subjects. Over a decade later, Study Link has been developed to a suite of 18 subjects and has had an enrolment of 24,030 students to date. As suggested in the evaluative review, the program in not only successful in meeting its objectives, it has proven to be a resource efficient and sustainable model. In his evaluative review of the Study Link program, Onsman (2008) notes the following:
Benefits to the community: Students with gaps in their formal education can find it difficult to demonstrate their academic eligibility for entrance to University programs. Study Link can facilitate this process. For example, by successfully completing the Study Link bridging subject, Transition to Policing Practice, more than 6,000 students have been able to demonstrate their academic eligibility thereby been admitted to study the Associate Degree of Policing Practice. On completion of the Study Link program, Study Link students have achieved at comparable rates to other students. This is supported by the Head of School of Policing Studies at CSU, Associate Professor Rosemary Woolston:

"Statistics indicate that the success rate of Study Link students entering the ADPP is only marginally less than traditional entry students, providing support to the effectiveness of Study Link in preparing students for further tertiary studies."

By facilitating entry to essential professional courses such as Policing and Nursing, the Study Link program is having a positive effect on regional engagement and the community at large. By facilitating equitable access to such programs, local communities directly benefit through broader pathways to university study.

Benefits to the sector: The Study Link program has provided the sector with a model of a sustainable, scalable and resource efficient enabling program that can be delivered by distance education. It is significant that the program has been rigorously evaluated, the results of which are available as lessons learned for other institutions considering implementing such a program. In his evaluative review of the Study Link program, Osnman (2008) was complimentary of CSU and the level of evaluation around the program:

"Very few evaluative reviews of bridging programs, either qualitative or quantitative have been published in Australia, and Charles Sturt University is to be congratulated on its willingness to hold up its Study Link program to external scrutiny."

The development of the Study Link program has enabled other organisations to utilise the program without duplication of effort and resources. Institutions such as Monash University and Edith Cowan University accept completion of Study Link subjects as proof of meeting entry criteria, and an increasing number of those teachers who are considering retraining at University are now being referred to Study Link by the NSW Department of Education and Training.

Recognition: It is encouraging that not only are student and staff evaluations extremely positive from within CSU, but also that several institutions from within Australia and internationally have expressed interest in purchasing the Study Link program to be tailored to their particular student cohort. The fact that other institutions are also using Study Link subjects as pre-requisites or proof of competence is also testament to the high standing and quality of the program. CSU academic staff and executive management also demonstrate strong support for the Study Link program and acknowledge the important role the program plays in student learning and engagement and a positive first year experience. Deputy Vice Chancellor (Academic), Professor Ross Chambers says:

"We are extremely proud of Study Link at CSU... it has a proven track record in helping students make the transition into University and at succeeding at University."

Awards: In addition to receiving the highest institutional award within CSU, Study Link has won an Australasian award and been the recipient of a Committee for University Teaching and Staff Development Grant. Specifically, formal recognition includes:

- 2000 - CUTSD evaluation grant to investigate student perceptions of the long term benefits of participating in the subject Skills for Learning Online.
- 2008 - Inaugural winner of Charles Sturt University Vice Chancellor's Award for Programs that Enhance Learning.
d. Concern for equity and diversity

As a regional University, CSU has a strong commitment to providing all students with equal access to training and support programs. Study Link is a proven educational strategy that clearly demonstrates good practice in educational access and equity. With in excess of 20,000 students studying by distance education at CSU at any one time, and more than half of all students fitting into at least one of the categories of educational disadvantage, creating equitable access to enabling programs is critically important for a positive first year experience. Study Link is vital to these groups as a means of increasing skills, confidence and knowledge prior to commencing University. The Study Link program provides the opportunity for students, who otherwise may not have them, to commence with the requisite skills and attitude, thereby increasing chances of success. The Study Link program is free of charge to Commonwealth Supported students, an important consideration for many students deciding whether to commence preparatory studies and particularly for students from a low socio-economic status. Professor Jo-Anne Reid from CSU’s Faculty of Education explains the importance of the Study Link program as an equity initiative:

“The contribution of Liz Smith and the members of her Study Link team to the achievement of the aspirational achievements of socially, geographically and educationally disadvantaged students who have applied to CSU over many years, is both well known and well respected across the Faculties whose student intake has need of these services. As Associate Dean of the Faculty of Education, with particular responsibility for Teacher Education, I am particularly well informed about the work of the Study Link program with the considerable numbers of mature aged, ‘second chance’ students who apply to enter undergraduate programs in teacher education, particularly in early childhood and primary. Our Faculty works closely with the Study Link team to ensure that our students have the initial support and contact that we have found they need to enable them to connect into tertiary education in a way that will support them to succeed.”

An important guiding factor in developing the Study Link program was to provide the same opportunities to distance education students to acquire the necessary competencies to study successfully at university, as those made available to on campus students. This access has been particularly important to specific cohorts such as prospective policing students who generally need to continue working and maintain family responsibilities while completing preparatory studies. The development of the Study Link program has allowed these students to ‘test the waters’ of tertiary study from their home, while still balancing family and work commitments. Associate Professor Rosemary Woolston and Head of Policing Studies supports the premise that Study Link promotes and supports equity and inclusiveness by improving access, participation and outcomes for diverse student groups. She states:

“Study Link provides a great opportunity for students who do not meet traditional academic entry requirements to demonstrate their ability to undertake tertiary studies by preparing prospective policing students for the academic requirements of the Associate Degree in Policing Practice (ADPP)... Study Link has become a significant entry pathway into the ADPP which has provided access to education and a career in policing for members of the community who would not have met the standards unless undertaking a lengthy period of study.”

As stated previously, a significant proportion of CSU students are represented in DEEWR equity categories. These student groups have also been identified as most at risk of becoming part of the ‘digital divide’ and not accessing online technologies (Barakeet, Payne, Scott & Cameron, 2000; Bell et al, 2002; NOIE, 2001; Oliver & Towers, 2000). In order to ensure this group is not disadvantaged and has an equal chance of succeeding in their studies, the subject, Skills for Learning Online, plays a particularly crucial student support role in the move from traditional delivery methods to an online environment. By situating the Study Link program within the same online learning environment used in CSU degrees, students are able to experience the particular modes of interaction and instruction that will be expected of them. The use of technology in an educational setting is often not intuitive or natural to those from backgrounds of educational disadvantage, so this opportunity is important to build skills and confidence in a supported environment. Professor Reid goes on to explain the significance of Study Link in bridging the digital divide for students:

“The program has a marked effect on the student experience in terms of confidence and motivation as it is often the practicalities of getting online, accessing digital resources, communicating with fellow students and academic staff via online discussion forums – aspects of study that are often taken for granted and assumed as normal for
middle class, metropolitan school leavers – that can form seemingly insurmountable barriers to confidence and capacity to study for those whose life chances have positioned them as outside this norm."

Student feedback gathered from subject evaluations of the Study Link subject Skills for Learning Online highlight the value of this initiative, especially for those first-year students studying by distance education or who are ‘new’ to technology use:

- "Every distance education student should be encouraged to take this subject before they begin studying so they have the background to communicate confidently with others at CSU. This has been a great help."
- "I found it extremely informative. Can’t fathom how any student in this new information age could survive without the skills taught in this course – well done CSU!"
- "The skills I have acquired over the past weeks I now take for granted. I am sure after taking this subject that I will not be afraid to take part in chats and the forums and to use the net as a most useful source of information. I now have renewed hope in doing well in my studies next year."

Other examples of directly addressing access and equity needs include the development of Transition to Nursing Studies. This subject is an initiative that grew from a research project (Gibb et al, 2003) which identified problems experienced by rural and remote students studying by distance education. This subject aims to better prepare students entering the nursing degree so that they increase their chances of successfully completing their degree. Heather Latham, CSU academic and School of Nursing Undergraduate Course Manager, has been closely involved with the Study Link program since its inception, in particular the nursing related subjects.

"these subjects have increased the student’s skills and assisted them to develop and increased understanding of the expectations of tertiary study... feedback from the students indicates that their learning experience has been positive and that they feel more confident to commence University study...there is no doubt that this program enhances student learning"

In addition to academic staff and students, CSU professional staff are strongly supportive of the Study Link program, particularly with respect to the support the program affords to students from diverse backgrounds. Manager of CSU Access and Work Unit, Vicki Pitcher, advocates the benefits of the Study Link program, particularly for those students who have experienced educational disadvantage.

"With so many of our students living in regional and rural areas, the development of an enabling program that is available to all students regardless of geographical location is of enormous benefit. The availability of the Study Link program by distance education means that no student is disadvantaged by lack of access to preparation programs. All students, regardless of location and background have an equal opportunity to develop skills critical in the first year of University study. The fact that the Study Link program is fully facilitated, provides such a supportive environment to students and a positive introduction to CSU, all at no cost to equity based students is an extremely proactive step in ensuring that all students benefit equally from the support the University provides. I believe the Study Link program is an important benchmark for others considering how best to support students and promote access and equity in relation to enabling programs."

Ray Eldridge, Manager of the Indigenous Student Services supports this view:

"Study Link is a great initiative that provides all students, regardless of their diverse backgrounds and locations, with access to a University preparation program. Many Indigenous students are first generation University students, so access to this type of opportunity is fundamental to their success."

Summary
Study Link is an enabling program that actively supports students’ academic transition to University, and demonstrates a positive influence on students’ first year experience. The Study Link program has provided a successful model of sustainable and scalable student support that utilises flexible delivery to facilitate enhanced participation and success in higher education for all students.

The rigorous evaluation of the Study Link program has provided evidence on many levels of the program’s effectiveness and in doing so has provided an important benchmark for the higher education sector in first year experience programs.

The Study Link program will continue to play a central role in the support of students at Charles Sturt University.
References


