

Dialoguing at a distance: How do we communicate with external students?

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For many, the ideal model for academic skills advising is a dialogical one. The learning adviser, working one-on-one with the student, engages them in a critical conversation about their work, helping them to discover what they are trying to do and develop the skills they need to do it. But how does this model work when the adviser is not in the same room as the student? The number of students who do not physically attend a university campus is growing steadily, and these students – often known as distance, external or flexible – have the same need for support, guidance and academic initiation as their on-campus counterparts. At one regional campus of Central Queensland University, 45% of the students who use the learning support centre are distance students. They submit drafts of their assignments to a learning adviser online, who reads and comments on the work and returns it to the student by email. This paper uses three case studies to explore the strengths, weaknesses and possibilities of communicating with students at a distance through email. It concludes that it is possible to engage in a modified form of dialogue with external students from which both the adviser and the student can benefit. But it also argues that other well-established models from the face-to-face environment can be equally effective online.

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