Open Universities Australia (OUA) is recognised as the national leader in online higher education in Australia, and provides open-entry higher education for tens of thousands of students each year. OUA students come from all walks of life, including school leavers, mature workers, full-time parents and those who are unemployed. Approximately half come from families where neither parent has a university qualification, around 10% are from low socio-economic status backgrounds and more than 5% identify as having a disability. These students tend to have multiple responsibilities, often with little prior educational experience, combined with lack of time, money or both. As such, OUA is an important entry point into higher education for many students from diverse backgrounds.

For students studying online, having a sense of connection and engagement with the learning community, through their contact with lecturers, fellow students and other staff, as well as feeling supported and assisted at appropriate stages through their learning journey, can make all the difference between persistence and academic success; and disillusionment, disappointment and abandonment of studies. The challenge for those delivering online education is to develop and implement strategies, through the use of appropriate technology, in which students can be successfully engaged and supported. Considerable research in the higher education sector across the globe indicates that the use of academic and personal support services makes a positive difference. There is a correlation between the use of such services and positive academic outcomes as well as with student retention (Couvillion-Landry, 2002; Krause, 2005a; McGivney, 2006; Skillbeck, 2006; Tinto, 2009; ACER, 2011).

So, within Open Universities Australia, how do we connect with students in a meaningful way to offer this support when we never see them face-to-face and when they may be studying across two or more institutions? And how do we help students to connect with and learn from each other when they never come together as a group? This paper will explore the challenges of student engagement and student support within the online environment and provide some examples of the ways in which educational technologies are being used within OUA to enhance academic success.

These include:

- Online Readiness Assessment tool, to assist prospective students to understand what is required for online study and how to prepare themselves for this.
– Preparatory studies delivered online to prepare students for tertiary studies and in

which tutors use educational technology to connect, communicate and enhance engagement and learning on a tutor-to-student as well as student-to-student basis.
– Online tutorial services in which students can submit drafts of assignments for feedback and advice and can also participate in synchronous or asynchronous discussion with tutors in a wide range of subject areas
– Personal counselling via technologies such as Skype and moving into secure e-counselling
– Using social media to connect students with services, to hear their feedback and to encourage discussion both with OUA and with each other about their needs.

To provide online open education effectively to a diverse cohort of students, the delivery of online course material is in itself not sufficient to ensure the academic success of many learners. For those of us involved in the delivery of online education, we have a responsibility to our learners to ensure we have the means in place to also encourage and support online students. Through the effective use of technology, we can assist them to develop a sense of identity as students, to feel that they belong to the learning community and to remain engaged and connected with their learning. This paper will demonstrate that, by such means, we can improve the academic outcomes for students in open-entry online environments.

The full paper of this presentation can now be viewed at http://eprints.utas.edu.au/16366/