

# Commercial third parties in higher education

## Reflections on a recent experience

Rowena Harper

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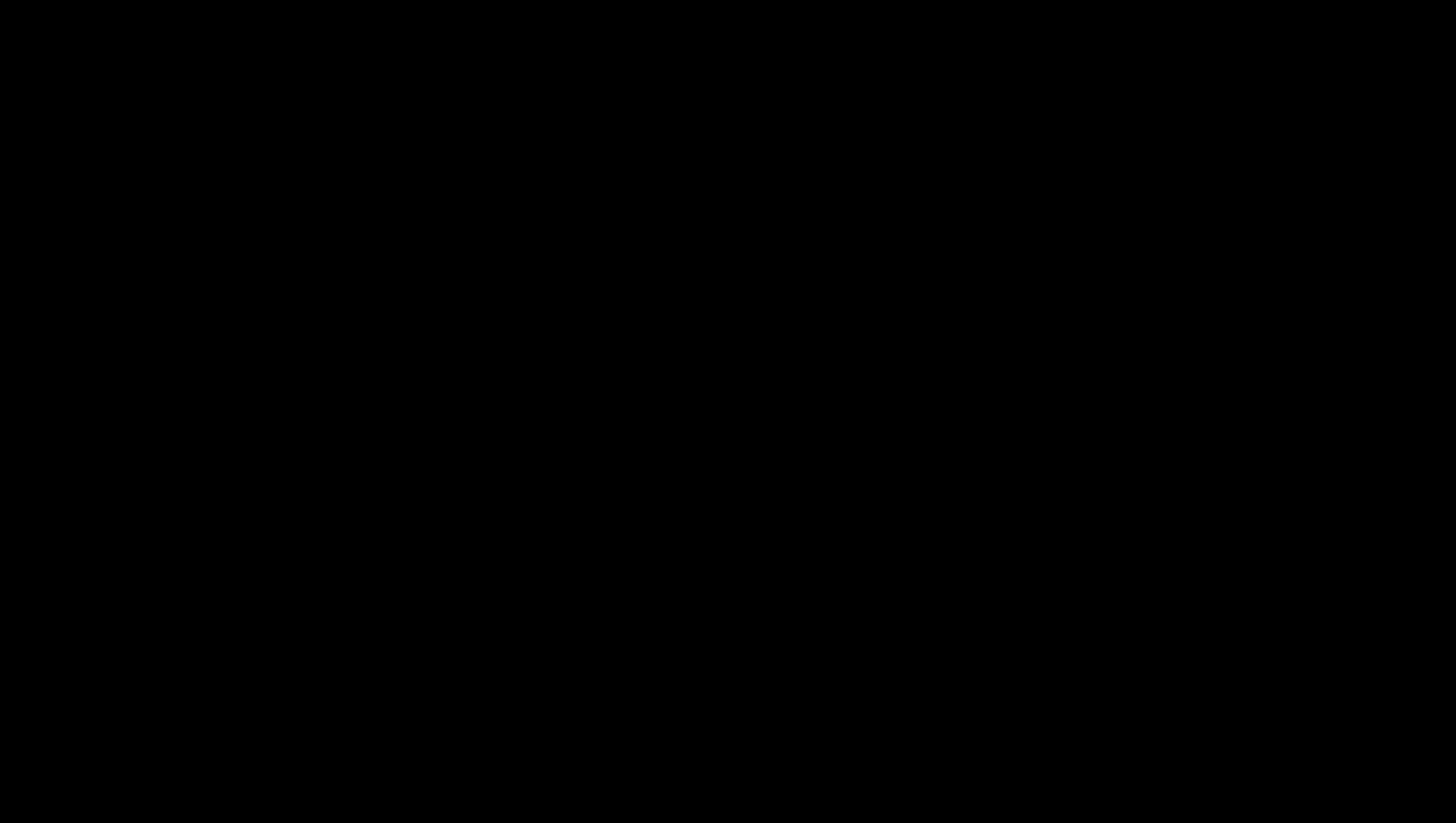
# Commercial third parties and ALL

- ❖ Rapid growth in online products, tools and services addressing academic language and learning (e.g. reading, writing, language, and learning at university)
- ❖ Universities are purchasing access to these, and providing them to students as learning resources and/or study support
- ❖ Benzie and Harper (2017) categorise these products as:
  - ❖ machine-based tools – automatically assess and give feedback on text
  - ❖ content-based programs – modules or short courses with little/no teacher involvement
  - ❖ person-based services – online platforms facilitating individual feedback on writing from a person (e.g. writing tutor)

# What's the challenge?

- ❖ These products are marketed as convenient, efficient solutions to complex challenges, such as writing development, retention and engagement
- ❖ They use bold claims about their impact:
  - ❖ Grammarly® “makes sure everything you type is clear, effective, and mistake-free” (<https://www.grammarly.com/>)
  - ❖ Pearson’s MyLab® and Mastering® programs “deliver consistent, measurable gains in student learning outcomes, retention, and subsequent course success”
  - ❖ Studiosity® (formerly Studiosity) - “academic performance, retention, and holistic care”
- ❖ Typically marketed directly to Senior Managers – not ALL staff

# A short history of Studiosity (previously Studiosity)



# A short history of Studiosity

- ❖ Launches in 2003
- ❖ 2007 – 2014 press coverage focusses on school tutoring services

*Northern Territory News, Straight to the Top End of the class, 2014*  
*Education Review, Online tutoring proves a hit, 2012*  
*School Matters, Online homework centre, 2012*  
*The West Australian, Student can access online tutoring, 2011*  
*Campus Review, Tutors on tap, 2010*  
*Education Review, Tapping into tutors in the classroom, 2010*  
*3rd Degree, ECU doing it for the kids, 2009*  
*Sun Herald, Help's a mouse click away, 2007*

# A short history of Studiosity

- ❖ Launches in 2003
- ❖ 2007 – 2014 press coverage focusses on school tutoring services
- ❖ In 2015, expansion to universities is evident

The screenshot shows the homepage of The Australian newspaper. At the top left is a red box with white text: "For full access 24/7" and "Subscribe now". The main title "THE AUSTRALIAN" is in large blue letters, with "FOR THE INFORMED AUSTRALIAN" below it. To the right is another red box with white text: "50% off for the first 12 weeks. Conditions apply." and "Subscribe now". Below the main title is a navigation bar with categories: NEWS, OPINION, BUSINESS REVIEW, NATIONAL AFFAIRS, SPORT, LIFE, TECH, ARTS, TRAVEL, HIGHER ED, MEDIA, and PROPERTY. Under the HIGHER EDUCATION heading, there is an article titled "ACER paper says uni dropouts likelier to be disadvantaged". The article includes a quote from "STEPHEN PARKER, BETH SHAW": "Sexual assault and harassment on campus cannot be tackled in isolation." There are social media sharing icons at the bottom of the article.

A new service being piloted in nine universities and about 20 TAFEs and pathways colleges may hold a key to addressing at least some of the drivers of attrition for both domestic and international students.

Jack Goodman, chief executive of YourTutor, said the service provided students with individualised online academic support via the institution's learning management system.

The tutors did not address the content of assignments but provided advice on structure, referencing and other structural elements of work.

# A short history of Studiosity

- ❖ Launches in 2003
- ❖ 2007 – 2014 press coverage focusses on school tutoring services
- ❖ In 2015, expansion to universities is evident
- ❖ In 2016, Founder Jack Goodman named as one of the 40 people on the ‘Hot List’ of *The Educator* magazine

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**JACK GOODMAN**



**JACK GOODMAN**  
Founder and executive chair  
YourTutor

In 2003, Goodman founded YourTutor, a personalised online learning experience and online study support platform. Today, YourTutor partners with hundreds of Australian schools and 75% of Australia's universities and TAFEs to turn moments of frustration into study success. Through this initiative, Goodman has helped secondary and tertiary students in both rural and metropolitan areas in all corners of the country. His deep belief in the power of technology to relieve household stress around study has impacted on how students learn throughout their school years and enhanced their aspiration and capability to pursue and succeed in tertiary education.



Website <http://www.yourtutor.edu.au/>

“Today, Studiosity partners with hundreds of Australian schools and 75% of Australia’s universities and TAFEs”

Source: [www.concanonline.com.au/rankings-hot-list-2016](http://www.concanonline.com.au/rankings-hot-list-2016)

# 2017

Financial review article  
on digital disruption in  
universities

January

## Ubiversity – tertiary education faces another shake-up from digital disruption

by Tim Dodd

Students from about a third of Australia's universities use the service, which delivers help to them quickly, whenever and wherever they need it. Interestingly, peak demand time is Sunday evenings, when students realise they need to catch up to be ready for classes, or to hand in an assignment, in the coming week.

The insight behind Goodman's business is that technology has changed the game of education. Effective personalised [tutoring can be delivered online](#). It doesn't have to happen on campus, or even face-to-face.

The analogy with Uber is not precise. A customer taking a ride with Uber pays for the service themselves but nearly all of YourTutor's services to students are paid for by their university. The institutions do this because they find it a cost-effective way to improve student achievement and reduce the dropout rate. Unlike taxi companies, which are shut out of the Uber model and are struggling for their future, universities are still central in what YourTutor is doing.

# 2017

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January

Posted on unilearn  
forum; Lesley requests  
response from AALL

Dear all

I think we need an AALL response to this, especially the first part of the article, which basically looks like an ad for *YourTutor*, and denigrates the value of highly qualified ALL practitioners:

<http://www.afr.com/leadership/ubiversity--tertiary-education-faces-another-shakeup-from-digital-disruption-20161221-gtfuuui>

The claims made by the *YourTutor* founder are very impressive the way they are written up here, and there is no counter to them anywhere in the article.

- "We are delivering just-in-time, affordable, academic learning support that has a positive, measurable impact on student success and student retention,"
- "Goodman's tutors are the Uber drivers of learning"
- "Their asset is their academic expertise"

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Rowena responds, after  
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Executive

Many managers I've talked to who are responsible for implementing such services at their institutions report mixed experiences: there are some benefits, but the services are limited in what they can provide. I think the main role for ALL staff and AALL as an organisation is to better understand what each of these services is actually providing. What is their approach? On what theory of learning is it based? What evidence is there of impact? And what is that impact, exactly (e.g. are students simply 'satisfied' after a consultation, or are there measurable gains in knowledge, skills or confidence)? Until this is known, no one can be sure that students are getting the kind of meaningful and sustainable learning advice they need and deserve.

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Is anyone aware of the Studiosity service, Australian-based but clearly keen to make in-roads into the UK HE erm market? <http://www.Studiosity.com/>  
It looks as if UEL have bought into this – does anyone working there have any experiences they could share? Or know anyone with experience of how this works in Australia?

This reminds me of something that came up at the 2nd International Webinar from ICALLD in early February... If I remember rightly, one of the Australian participants was talking about online skills support or some kind of outsourced skills support being offered by Pearson – I think??

[Lesley responded by sharing Fiona's VU document with FH's permission]

I raised that as part of the panel discussion... In Australia, the outsourcing of components of ALL work (to companies such as Studiosity etc.) seems to be part of a larger trend... So I think ALL practitioners shouldn't take this personally ... but nor should they accept this without robust critical engagement. Similar to what Fiona has done, I think the most reasonable approach is to: question the veracity of their claims ... identify clearly what kind of service they offer to students and ... the likely value ... and how the service may be used to complement what's already in place AND/OR suggest a better alternative (e.g. peer initiatives that benefit already enrolled students)

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VU Senior management request Fiona's post be removed

To be honest, it's causing me some grief that Fiona and everyone else has acquiesced so readily to Victoria University's "forceful" request. If academics aren't going to defend academic freedom by standing up to unreasonable behaviour from senior managements, then they might as well all pack up and go home.

April

This stimulates more heated debate than the original post

Fiona – solidarity and good wishes. I'm truly sorry you've been put in this difficult situation. I'm sure we all share your dismay and alarm at what has happened and how, but also appreciate, and empathise with, the precarious position individuals find themselves in.

While I completely understand the pressures academic staff are under in the current climate with regards to job security and professional reputations, I would not want this space to be censored.

I suspect the issue is really that an internal document was shared rather than a critique of Studiosity was undertaken. I'd hope that we'd all support the right of the academic (or actually anyone else in society) to give a critical appraisal of something.

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We have enough information as a community to understand the larger issues at stake and to have this conversation about them. For me they are:

- the commercialisation of higher education and the refiguring of education as a service in which commercial interests must be protected;
- surveillance and disciplining of individual academic workers, their ideas and public behaviour;
- the role of educational technology in the new political/economic spaces of higher education;
- precariousness of academic employment, especially beyond tenured academic staff, and in academic services (more likely to be women).

Fiona is not alone in finding herself caught up in these forces, and neither is her university

# Threat to the profession?

- ❖ Fitting a 3rd party service into a (declining) budget
- ❖ Marketing and self-promotion
- ❖ Evidence of impact
- ❖ Are students getting what they expect and/or need?
  - ❖ A Study Skills approach vs Curriculum-integrated approaches.

# Potential partner?

- ❖ Not a 'set and forget' service
  - ❖ Regular monitoring of use
  - ❖ Liaising with stakeholders (academics, students, provider)
  - ❖ Evaluation
- ❖ Quality control
- ❖ Managing expectations on campus
  - ❖ Context and location
  - ❖ Connections and disconnections
- ❖ Leveraging the data
  - ❖ For the institution
  - ❖ For the provider

# Caution required?

- ❖ How do we engage in meaningful debate about the role of these services?

# Conclusion

- ❖ Digital disruption is affecting every sector, and every role: we can't ignore it
- ❖ Some products may help ALL units do some of their work more efficiently, and more flexibly
- ❖ Some may make valuable contributions to the student learning experience
- ❖ There is an opportunity to evaluate these products and determine *what kind* of contribution they make