

***Student Retention and Support in Open and
Distance Learning***

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This work may be cited as: Grote, Bill. 'Student Retention and Support in Open and Distance Learning'. The Open Polytechnic of New Zealand, Working Paper, November 2000.

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Printed and published by The Open Polytechnic of New Zealand, Lower Hutt.

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ISSN — 1174 – 4103

ISBN — 0 – 909009 – 25 – 2

Working Paper No: 2-00

Manuscript submitted for publication in May 2000.

Revised November 2000.

Abstract

Tertiary education institutions take the issue of student retention and successful completion of courses and programmes by students very seriously. The substantial literature on this topic suggests that withdrawal and drop-out are particularly prevalent in open and distance learning. However, literature does not appear to offer any clear answers as to the causes of the problem, nor does it present any proven solutions that would reduce the incidence of withdrawal or drop-out. This study, based on a literature survey and experience gained in an open and distance learning environment, finds that much of the completion data cited in the literature has little comparative value. Hence, it is suggested that the 'problem of drop-out' in open and distance learning, relative to that in face-to-face provision, has been overstated and that the two modes of delivering tertiary education cannot be compared directly.

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Student Retention and Support in Open and Distance Learning

Introduction

The issue of student retention in courses and programmes is of major importance to Open and Distance Learning (ODL) tertiary education providers for three principal reasons. First, there is a perception that ODL has significantly lower retention of students than contact, or face-to-face, teaching/learning. This is allied to an opinion often expressed by academic staff, in spite of much evidence to the contrary (Russel, 1999), that ODL is second choice in quality when compared to on-campus delivery.

The second reason for the focus on student retention is driven by complex financial considerations. These considerations relate to the unresolved question of the cost effectiveness of ODL (Keegan, 1996:167–182 and Daniel, 1996:60–65) compared with face-to-face learning provision by campus-based universities, where the former have high course preparation costs and the latter have high fixed costs for buildings. There is also the suspicion that high levels of early student drop-out, occurring after student fees and government subsidies have been banked, are required by ODL institutions to subsidise their otherwise inefficient operations. Acceptance of this argument would imply that high levels of student attrition are necessary to balance the accounts.

Third is the looming question of what would happen to the financial viability of ODL institutions, if ODL providers only received government subsidies for students who have successfully completed the programme of study they enrolled in (as happens already in some instances). Under this regime, funding could be based solely on aggregated outputs that have been achieved at predetermined and agreed levels of quantity and quality.

Given that unsatisfactory retention rates exist in all tertiary education, and at supposedly higher levels in distance education, it is strange that after many years of extensive research effort and many publications, answers to this multi-faceted problem seem as elusive as ever.

Driven by what would seem to be costly inefficiencies, and under the gaze of an increasingly critical public, many distance tertiary institutions are at pains to reduce drop-out by undertaking various measures and interventions to provide increased academic and social support. Hence, these two facets of distance education, retention and support, are closely linked and are considered together in this study.

Confronted with these concerns, it is understandable that, particularly in ODL institutions, there is a strong incentive to take these matters seriously and to be seen to be proactive. In the United States college sector, the employment of retention consultants is not uncommon, and a substantial volume of descriptive literature on the topic has been published. Researchers from most of the traditional providers of ODL in Western countries have also published on this topic. The difficulty of finding clear answers and solutions is underscored by an evaluation of this literature. The large volume of published work does not achieve agreement on major causes, or provide remedies for reducing drop-out or non-retention of students in either face-to-face colleges and universities or ODL institutions. An indication of publishing output in this (wider) field is provided by Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) who, in 'How College Affects Students', referred to 2,600 publications. Tinto (1993), in 'Leaving College, Rethinking the Causes and Cures of Student Attrition', cites 442 publications. Russel (1999), in 'The No Significant Difference Phenomenon', cites 400 studies on the effectiveness of distance education.

In many instances, the published work is based on descriptive studies and, to a lesser extent, on case studies, and correlational and experimental research. It tends to list and describe commonsense causes and offers solutions that seem, to workers in ODL, intuitively correct and applicable. However, there is scant evidence that, excluding low academic ability of students, or remedies to obvious system faults or quality problems at the institution, the various interventions tried were rewarded with sustained success.

A typical finding of such research is that the tested intervention had none (or only a very small) effect on student retention, but that it did increase student satisfaction with the institution. Moreover, it is reported that in a group of students facing the same difficulty, some cited the difficulty as the reason for withdrawal, but others in the same group (also noting this difficulty as a problem) continued successfully with their studies. Thus, while making some progress in highlighting the issues and keeping the discussion alive, the literature on the subject provides no quick fix to the problem of student withdrawal (Tinto, 1975, 1982 and 1993; Roberts, 1984; Scales, 1984; Thompson, 1984; Pascarella and Terenzini, 1980; Getzlaf et al, 1984; Tallman, 1994; West, 1998; Paul and Brindley, 1996; Brindley, 1995; Powell and Woodley, 1993; Taylor et al, 1993 and Thomson, 1999).

As will be discussed below, however, a counter argument can be developed proposing that the 'problem' of early student withdrawal in ODL is overstated and that, in fact, there is no problem relative to face-to-face provision if all factors and intervening variables are taken into account.

For this study over 70 papers, books and book chapters representing a cross-section of the total literature were reviewed. This review suggests that educational research is beset by inherent problems. There is perhaps a desire to replicate in education research something akin to the rigour of the double blind experiment used, for example, in drug trials. This task would not be possible even with all the compensatory averaging, random selecting or careful design of questionnaires. Such care in experimental design may improve matters but will not give the same predictive value or repeatability of experiments with fewer, more stable variables. Candidates often give fickle initial answers that, on lengthy interview, are found to conceal layers of excuse, compensation or blame. This problem may lead to a complete revaluation and reversal of the first answer or response. It is not surprising, therefore, that the quality of educational research has been found wanting on occasion, and has been subject to negative evaluation with regard to experimental design and conclusions drawn.

Alexander (1999:181), who carried out an evaluation of 104 papers on innovative education projects in Australia, concludes: 'Once the project is complete... the majority (of authors) are unable to claim that their project has been successful in terms of the original aims, but many are able to account for improved attitudes to learning.' Bain (1999:165), commenting on this work, writes: '...that papers purporting to be evaluations of innovations in higher education were being submitted in increasing numbers to the journal, yet most were of limited scope and quality.'

Similarly, in an extensive review and critique of distance education research, Phipps and Merisotis (1999:2) state: 'There is relative paucity of true, original research dedicated to explaining or predicting phenomena related to distance learning', and 'The overall quality of the original research is questionable and thereby renders many of the findings inconclusive.' The authors list, describe and give examples of shortcomings of the work, including neglect of the Novelty Effect and the John Henry Effect. These relate respectively to the increase in interest, effort and motivation that may occur because students are doing something different and that awareness of participating in an experiment generates anxiety in control groups who, feeling 'threatened or challenged or being in competition with a new programme or approach', 'outdo themselves to perform better.'

Reading these critical appraisals in conjunction with the retention-withdrawal literature creates a strong sense of recognition. It must be conceded that, despite attempting best practice — for example, by randomising or taking other precautions — educational research cannot avoid remaining limited. It is important to be aware of these limits and to treat research findings accordingly. (Beyond the handicaps of time and financial constraints, how would research adequately accommodate students' changeable motivation or feelings?)

Definitions

In student retention research, terms (including the opposite meaning, for example, 'non-retention') are often used interchangeably and comprise: course mortality, engagement, drop-out, attrition, persistence, progression, completion and successful completion, conclusion, participation, withdrawal, preferred learning, and success barriers. The word 'retention' in conjunction with 'course' or 'programme' is used primarily to indicate students who are retained (that is, stay with the institution), and who are actively participating in their course or programme. 'Successful completion' is used when students have passed a course or successfully completed a programme of study, thereby gaining the desired credential.

Considering the past and the present, one could state that normally ODL is distinguished by an almost permanent physical separation of teacher and learner. In addition, ODL requires greater use of old (phone) and new (Internet) telecommunication methods for information delivery and tutoring. There is usually also an absence of regular face-to-face meetings of students in study groups or socially.

The above definition of ODL as a distinctly different activity from face-to-face learning (Keegan, 1996:44) is, however, increasingly difficult to maintain because the entire tertiary education sector is entering a period of rapid change that will result in blurring of boundaries and convergence of methods. Most of this growth is generated by campus-based institutions that are transforming themselves into dual mode providers by rapidly adding Internet-based courses and programmes. It would be unreasonable, for example, to compare ODL student retention in a dual mode institution (where students may simultaneously study in pure distance, pure face-to-face, and hybrid courses) with retention outcomes in an exclusive ODL provider. The dual mode institution can provide, on-campus, many social and academic integrating and support factors that reduce alienation and increase goal commitment — services which the sole ODL provider normally cannot match.

The ODL sector has, for many years, tried to produce its own theory of education. General pedagogical principles are common across the education discipline as a whole, but delivery factors have always given ODL its own 'flavour'. However, recent developments in Information and Communication Technology (ICT) have blurred the distinction between classroom delivery and open and distance delivery, as the 'virtual classroom' takes shape. The potentials and protocols of the virtual classroom are still being explored. Another view holds that the debate focuses on ODL delivery mechanisms, where a distinction can be made between 'development' and 'delivery' of OD learning. But it is likely that, in about ten years time, once the current rush of ICT-driven change in the sector has abated, amongst the surviving global mega universities another attempt at formulating a workable education theory for ODL will be created that will meet with more permanence and success.

Statistics and Comparisons

The four tables referred to below are taken from ODL literature and provide data on completion rates for courses and programmes (Daniel, 1996:31; Taylor et al., 1993:285; Huelsmann, 1999:77, and Powell and Woodley, 1993:285). The data in the tables has been assembled from ODL institutions in different countries. It indicates that successful programme completion for ODL students ranges from less than 10% to around 35%. For course completion it may reach 90% but more typically falls to around 50% of initially enrolled students for first courses studied. These figures are often compared to campus-based, face-to-face completion statistics where a benchmark of around 55% programme retention and successful completion for BA students in the United States is generally accepted (Tinto, 1993). However, some European countries with more stringent tertiary entry requirements report face-to-face university programme completions of 70–80% (Peters, 1992). Statistics for New Zealand (Bunny, 1998) state that, on average, 20% of students in tertiary institutions withdraw in their first year. Similarly, an Australian study (reported by Illing, 2000) has shown that, on average, 20% of students withdraw each year, giving a retention rate just under 60% for 3-year degree programmes. Illing's article quotes additional data that show differing retention rates relative to gender, ethnicity, disability, educational and socio-economic background.

The ODL data presented here (which are, with local variations, repeated in other published papers) invite a number of broad comments. First, the statistics provided in the literature for face-to-face universities are likely to be fairly accurate. For example, Tinto (1993) provides stable data for BA students in the United States based on records spanning 100 years. Furthermore, most campus-

based universities admit students with similar matriculation standards, have them pass through the system in cohorts and all studying, at least in the English-speaking world, in relatively uniform programmes at undergraduate level. Hence, accurate statistics are relatively easy to obtain and analyse.

In the provision of ODL, highly varied or entirely different institutions deal with a much more disparate student body, making many of the comparisons provided in the literature almost meaningless. For example, ODL providers may range from institutions that deliver learning material on basic paper copy supported by audio cassette/radio, to others that deliver quality, instructionally designed courses on paper copy augmented by audio/video or CD-Rom material and supported by telephone and Internet communication services. Some providers may use all of the preceding — plus regular television broadcasts, local face-to-face tutorial support, and mandatory, yearly, face-to-face block courses. Lastly, more recent entrants into the ODL field may be entirely Internet-based.

As previously noted, the picture is blurred by the rapid growth of dual mode institutions: mainly traditional campus-based universities that provide some courses or whole programmes by ODL methods. Increasingly, some of these dual mode institutions have split existing courses into delivery hybrids by providing some modules of the course face to face and some modules by the most suitable ODL method.

Then there is the recognition that individual students in ODL typically come from a wider range of backgrounds than can be found in face-to-face institutions. If students attend a fully 'open' institution, they may not possess the normally obligatory tertiary entry requirements. These ODL students may thus be able to enrol in, progress in and finish their study with none or fewer of the time restrictions and pacing common in face-to-face universities or the more restrictive ODL providers. Such students may be school leavers in a traineeship or apprenticeship arrangement. They may be adults studying subjects related to and complementing their professional practice, or they may be adults (see Knowles, 1997, description of adult learning/androgogy in 'The Adult Learner') studying in new fields to prepare for a career change. ODL students may study for interest or for quality of life choices. Like contact students, some may wish to obtain a qualification as quickly as possible without diverging from the minimum time necessary to pass. Other ODL students may require only the course material. Aiming perhaps to refresh a skill or update knowledge in some vocation or profession, these students are generally not interested in sitting examinations. Students in ODL institutions, in stark contrast to those with face-to-face providers, may live in isolated communities where formation of a study group is impossible except where available via the Internet. Others

living in cities can easily link up in person with fellow students if required or desired.

This almost capricious range of learners of almost any age, from any socio-economic group and from any geographical location, exists only in the flexible ODL environment. These students have diverse educational, vocational and professional backgrounds. They are found in prisons or on location in the armed forces, are able to study full time or part time, and can defer study for a while, leave, and return. Some complete courses in an ODL environment for convenience and then use the credit for completion of their study in another institution.

Given such often country-specific options and variety, it is not surprising that comparisons of face-to-face learning with ODL, and of different ODL institutions with their very different clientele, have only limited usefulness in the discussion of retention rates.

Possible Causes of Drop-out

Before discussing the merit of the specific reasons provided by students for their decision to withdraw from study, it is necessary to comment in some detail on some more general but rarely estimated and discussed reasons for non-retention. It is reasonable to suggest that these student movements in and out and across the sectors (Howard and Rogers, 1991) are more typical of ODL students, and that the effect of these movements (a net loss for the ODL sector) appears in statistics as a reduction in programme completions. For example:

- The student may leave tertiary education for a while but intend to return to the same or another institution for a large number of possible reasons. (This is also referred to as stop-out.)
- The student may mix and match distance and face-to-face learning for a wide range of possible reasons, but the ODL institution may not be aware that this is happening.
- The student has no intention or need to complete a whole programme or even an entire course. Again, the ODL institution may have no knowledge of this fact. There may even be procedural reasons for students not wanting to disclose this intention.

- ODL is typically part-time study. As a result, completion times, without credit for work completed elsewhere (for a standard 3-year undergraduate degree), average 6 years. It is likely that most of the voluntary and involuntary reasons for withdrawal are simply amplified by this time factor.
- A small number of students may be suspended from the institution because of plagiarism, cheating in exams or other sufficiently serious misdemeanours.

Aggregated, these causes will appear as a percentage in drop-out statistics even though (excluding suspension) there has been no lack of success by the student or failure of the system. Quite the contrary may even be true — that the causes actually represent the welcome flexibility of the system.

Apart from these factors of changeable student intent, which may not be clear even to the student at the time of enrolment but are entirely reasonable, there are other voluntary and involuntary reasons (including academic failure) for students to withdraw.

Consideration of retention rates of students in tertiary education indicates that reasons for retention or non-retention can be grouped in three broad categories of factors and variables. These three categories are distinguished by factors that

1. relate to, or are controlled by, the ODL institution
2. stem from the student's environment: for example, family, significant other, peer groups (work and social) and manager at place of work
3. are directly related to or stem from student attitudes and aptitudes: for example, motivation, perseverance in adversity, academic ability, capacity to grow and to go on learning.

Arguably, the student is probably the most complex, variable and important component in the 'institution-environment-student' triangle when considering student retention and support issues. It has been reported repeatedly (for example, Morgan and Tam, 1999; Brindley, 1995, and author's own observation) that withdrawing or staying students often describe the same obstacle as either responsible for their withdrawal or an irritant or hindrance but not causing withdrawal from their course of study. On first inquiry, a fairly common reason given for the decision to withdraw is lack of time. On further inquiry, however, other reasons are also given. Among these, but often obscured, is lack of motivation or real or perceived academic inadequacy.

Problems or barriers to study (Hillesheim, 1998), when encountered over time, are likely to be much more prevalent, disruptive and important to adult students. Typical examples of involuntary reasons for withdrawal are: financial difficulties, major change at work or at home (such as relocation, promotion or retrenchment), withdrawal of support, birth of a child, and illness (self or family). Consideration and inclusion in statistical information of these essentially involuntary reasons are likely to significantly lower the student percentage difference between ODL and face-to-face retention. However, the necessary data to prove this is not available, and would be difficult and costly to obtain. Another significant factor to take into consideration is that most ODL students study part time. As noted previously, an undergraduate degree could take 6 years or more to complete. There is thus much greater opportunity for one of the many involuntary withdrawal factors to strike. It is estimated, based on author's personal experience, that for students who have successfully engaged in their study, these (in the main) involuntary withdrawal decisions may be responsible for 5–10% of the total.

Also contributing significantly are students' more or less voluntary decisions to withdraw. These can include failure to integrate, academically or socially, into the institution (a longitudinal process likely to lead to a decision to withdraw and detailed in influential models by Tinto, 1975, and Bajtelsmit, 1988). This is an area where the institution can make a difference through appropriate intervention and support.

Other common causes for voluntary withdrawal from ODL courses include: inappropriate course/programme selection; underestimation of the difficulty and time requirements of distance study; clash with personal study preference; lack of academic ability (Lockwood, 1995) and preparedness; weak motivation or goal orientation, and withdrawal of external support.

Students identifiable as possible voluntary or involuntary withdrawals often do not hand in their first assignment and make no further contact with the institution. These students are often classified as non-starts. Here, the institution, through honest and clear representation and communication, provision of self-tests, bridging/start-up material, quality counselling and advice, is able to make a major difference to initial student retention.

Some ODL institutions have a post-enrolment period in which students may withdraw without academic or financial penalty. In other institutions — for example, at the Open University (OUUK) — a period of provisional registration lasting 3 months is provided. Students pay a small fee for this period and then they may, if they wish, discontinue without penalty. The OUUK's retention statistics do not count students who withdraw during the provisional

enrolment period. It seems a reasonable practice to disregard non-starts in retention counts, as long as the relevant time periods, financial details and academic policies are clearly stated.

It would be tempting to aggregate the non-voluntary and voluntary withdrawal factors, assign to them some reasonable percentage figures, and conclude that student retention in ODL institutions is close to and comparable with data published for face-to-face teaching/learning. Although a general statement to this effect may be made, supporting statistics would be unreliable because of the wide range of different variables applicable to the two systems.

In essence, it is suggested that the two systems, ODL and face to face, cannot be directly compared. Furthermore, attempts at direct comparison might ultimately damage the cause of ODL in that such comparison could reduce the necessary and continuing effort by institutions to reduce voluntary withdrawal or to eliminate the barriers that cause involuntary withdrawal and attrition.

Voluntary-Involuntary Withdrawal Revisited

There are often other, more subtle and tacit reasons, underlying voluntary decisions to withdraw from study. These apparently minor factors may be enough to tip a finely balanced commitment in the direction of quitting and defeat. The deciding factor may be a disparaging remark by a tutor, a spouse, a manager or a friend: an incident that may (aggregated with other minor factors such as a favourite sports programme re-scheduled into study time) act, over time, to cause the decision to be made.

Other hard-to-measure influencing factors may derive from the student's perceptions of the relative worth, trust in, recognition and community standing of the institution, or the standing and credibility of the credential issued by that institution (Daniel, 1996:8 and 42). An extreme case would be the relative value and public ranking of a degree from, say, Harvard University versus a degree obtained from a small town college. Another factor may be a personal perception of a severe intervening variable, treated as a nuisance by some but the cause of termination of studies for others. The question of what creates and sustains goal commitment and motivation is difficult to answer with precision.

Variables in an individual's history and capability may include

- the importance of socio-economic background, of support at home, at work and from peers

- issues of ambition and the importance of reward (financial and otherwise)
- self management and performance in previous learning and, related to this, the ability to get self-reinforcing, intrinsic motivation from learning, knowing, understanding and being creative. A lack of these attributes may set in progress eventual disengagement and withdrawal by the student.

These variables indicate some of the key attributes and competencies of the ideal of the lifelong and independent (formal) learner who would be likely to succeed in ODL, as described by Peters (1998), Candy (1991) and Candy et al (1994).

The educational philosophy in use at face-to-face universities (by necessity as much as design) is applied by 'pushing new students in at the deep end' where they either become sufficiently independent or autonomous as learners to survive and thrive, or they sink and drop out (Wall, 1997). Universities have been able to get away with this approach because it is now traditional and cleverly marketed as part of the 'character building' university experience. This course of action is impossible in ODL, particularly in locations where there are more potential places than available students (as is the case in New Zealand at present), and during a time of growing competition for students. The question for ODL is, then, how can independence or autonomy be created and fostered in students where it does not yet exist and where it does not seem to be growing on its own, as it does (supposedly) for most university students? Intelligent and high quality instructional design (multimedia, interactive, contextual and rich learning media) can help, but this continues to be an expensive option.

Based on the above considerations, the cause of ODL would be served well if a scholastic aptitude test and other relevant general psychological profiles (to provide information about cognitive styles and learning preferences) could be supplied at the time of enrolment. A tailored, individualised learning package that would minimise possible withdrawal for a number of causes could then be designed. The tailored package might also be designed to maximise deep learning for that particular student. Such innovative, individualised attention to student needs could be seen as taking ODL further away from its image of representing an industrial education model. (This also assumes that more sophisticated adaptive and flexible Internet provision becomes available.)

However, this option seems even costlier, notwithstanding ethical concerns and possible student resistance to the extent of information gathering. On the other hand, required Internet provision will make all of the above possible, in the not-too-distant future probably at a reasonable cost to the Internet-literate student.

Increased learning efficiency could make up for any drawbacks. If and when this happens, however, the premise of this study will also have changed beyond recognition.

What Will Maximise Student Retention?

To simplify this discussion a number of assumptions are made as being true for the excellent ODL provider:

- The ODL institution has established, audited quality assurance systems, is appropriately accredited, and has qualified motivated and enthusiastic staff who take an interest in their students' progress and are accessible to students.
- There are excellent, highly regarded learning resources that have been instructionally designed for the best possible ODL application (Woodley and Parlett, 1983).
- Processes for delivery of learning material and for tutoring, assessing, moderating, administration, dealing with student complaints and queries, library and other services are well resourced and of a high standard.
- There is trust and recognition from industry, peer groups, and former students.
- There is ongoing dialogue with stakeholders so that processes are reviewed and adjusted and problems are fixed before they grow too large.
- The lecturers, instructional designers and librarians of the institution have become specialists in ODL design and delivery through formal and informal learning, practice and research.
- The institution employs new technologies after careful investigation, testing and staff training and is mindful of cost and access issues for students.

Where these assumptions apply, possible barriers relating to institutional difficulties and epistemological impediments (Cross, 1981) would have been removed.

Discussed below are ways in which the excellent institution as described can pre-empt or remove the effect of barriers or assist its students with the problems and expected difficulties that experience has indicated are likely to arise.

In the existing ODL system, which depends primarily on print and the postal service, student progress through a programme of study can be visualised as moving from left to right with time, passing milestones along the way. These milestones may include initial interest, enrolment, the successful completion of courses, and the final goal of graduation. The incidence of student drop-out or withdrawal over time, superimposed on this continuum, can then be separated into four critical time zones in which withdrawal may occur for different reasons.

Zone One covers that period where a potential student expresses an interest by requesting further or more detailed information. On receipt of such information it is likely that many students decide that a particular programme is not for them or that distance learning would not be the best study option. It is during this period, however, that many potential students make a wrong decision, either to stop further enquiries or to proceed and to enrol. It would be impossible to eliminate all erroneous decision-making throughout the process, but it is likely that it can be reduced. Better decision making will decrease the amount of frustration, ill will, and sense of failure experienced by both student and institution.

The task of communicating clearly and unambiguously the entry requirements, curriculum, assessment, length and difficulty of study, costs and eventual employment, falls mainly to marketing, academic and administrative staff. Material can also be provided on paper or on the Internet that enables some self-assessment of readiness or capability by the student. At this early time, perception of the worth and image of the institution and of self as a successful student is already important. The student may internalise and identify with the admired research success and the high public profile of the institution. An ODL provider, like a campus-based university, can do much to build up and foster a public image of quality, international reputation and importance through maintaining excellence in teaching and research.

Zone Two is that period between date of enrolment and receipt of study materials, and handing in the first assignment or contact with the tutor. This period of exposure to the first course or module contains a moment of truth for many students. It has been identified as that of greatest loss (often exceeding 50% of the total of enrolled students). Many institutions make the passage easier by allowing provisional registration or withdrawal during a given period without financial or academic penalty. Some institutions provide starter kits, support handbooks, bridging courses, welcoming letters or staff contact with each student. It is also good practice to set the deadline for the first assessment (if there are deadlines) early in the course but design a relatively simple

assessment to encourage early contact. This will give students some self-confidence, particularly if some percentage of the marks accrues toward the final result. If at all possible, bringing students together at this time for orientation or induction, tutorial or early revision of prior knowledge would not only provide an opportunity to meet classmates and lecturers (easing future communications) but also boost student motivation and the will to persist and seek help when the pressure mounts later on.

However, these pastoral and support activities are much too expensive to sustain for many ODL institutions, given the large numbers of enrolled students for one-on-one (phone, letter, email, fax) contact. Some help and greater economies of scale will undoubtedly come from wider use of the Internet, where Web pages (providing news and information) or Net forums (for group discussion) provide dynamic synchronous and asynchronous communication channels. Many pioneering lecturers have already found out, however, that one-to-one discussions via email tend to break down quickly due to (mainly social) overuse and repeated requests for the same or similar information from different callers. It is likely that some of the losses in Zone Two could be prevented by giving more attention to measures in Zone One. This may, of course, lead to reduced enrolment of students, who either would not enrol in the first place or would drop-out before being fully enrolled to avoid unnecessary wastage. Unfortunately, this may have a negative effect on institutional cash flow, perhaps providing a strong false incentive not to be too selective up front.

Zone Three can be defined as starting after the first engagement with the ODL institution and finishing after the final assessment, which may be an externally invigilated exam. During this longer time period, many of the involuntary factors and variables come into play in decisions to withdraw. It is suggested that quality assured processes and excellent learning materials, together with friendly, encouraging, enthusiastic and professional staff, are the most important components in a strategy to retain students. The publication of a regular, interesting and topical student news magazine (perhaps on the Internet) will have a positive reinforcing effect and reduce student alienation. Letters, notes and friendly reminders are also useful if some time has passed since the last contact.

It appears that many students benefit from having deadlines and pacing imposed, in their effort to complete and hand in assessments on time. Unfortunately, such action reduces the institutions openness, which may have been its attractive differentiating feature. Another positive feature of the study experience would be an ODL provider's ability to cater for the more independent learners by allowing them to get on with the work as quickly as

possible on their own, whilst also creating structures for group study for others. A compulsory 1- or 2-week block-course to deal with practical course components, to review and reflect, and to prepare for the final examination will benefit student learning, lead to further bonding of group members and probably increase retention. Again, this is costly, but Internet provision of such services could provide some compromise in the future.

Zone Four encompasses the re-enrolment decision period that normally occurs after the successful completion of an earlier course. There may be a predetermined decision to progress with the first ODL provider, to leave formal study, to take a break or to enrol somewhere else. If the decision is still open, much will depend on the student's previous experience with ODL, with the institution and on the range of other options available (such as using the just-completed course for credit, and enrolling at another institution).

The cohort of potentially ongoing or progressing students is likely to be the largest under-developed market for the ODL institution, particularly in countries where there is strong competition for new students. At this juncture (more so than in the past) much depends on the solid groundwork and the quality of processes, materials and services in place. Work requirements may force a student to continue with their study. However, what counts most is the feeling (the perception) generated in the student through the past learning experience: its relative value, permanence, benefit and applicability to self and to professional practice. Congruent with this are other intangible and intrinsic motivators that arise from the pleasure of learning and understanding, and from the growth in independence and self-assurance.

Lastly, there may be growing peer approval and support, financial rewards and, in some cases, the recognition that comes from being a student at a highly regarded tertiary institution. If required, the institution may provide discounts or other incentives at this stage but, preferably, the student should want to continue based on the perceived value of the previous experience. The leaving student should be the exception.

(The evolving and converging nature of ODL and face-to-face learning, via 'telelearning' requires insertion of a caveat regarding the above. General acceptance of Internet delivery, combined with the availability of multimedia, simulations in virtual reality, and best possible instructionally designed, learning material, could make learning intrinsically motivating, rewarding and almost addictive. If this happens the sequence of events described above would no longer hold true and a new interpretation of student progression through ODL will be required.)

Conclusion

A strong argument is made that ODL and face-to-face provision cannot be directly compared for student retention determination and analysis. The same can also be said of ODL institutions, with their widely differing student clientele, internal processes and academic levels. Investigation can be made only on an institution-by-institution basis, taking relative cost-benefit analyses, overall effectiveness and the national interest (where publicly funded) into account.

A paradox emerges from the study of retention and student support in that various interventions set in place to retain students are appreciated by the students but may do little or nothing to increase retention. Complex predictive models have been developed and tested, but they fail even for simple cases such as the uniform group of ex-high school students in face-to-face colleges and universities. Here, similarly, the predictive value is low.

Assuming that the ODL institution provides high quality services (so that variables relating to the academic and administrative performance can be neglected) and learner friendly structures are in place, even then, the prediction of retention or withdrawal is difficult and almost impossible to achieve with precision and validity. Morgan and Tam (1999:105) conclude:

No single factor can be attributable to student withdrawal or non-persistence. Rather, it is the interaction of numerous factors, situational, institutional, dispositional and epistemological that produces the outcome of completing or not completing the course.

Peters (1992:241) makes a similar statement:

In spite of this knowledge [reasons why students withdraw] the question of who will keep up studies and who will drop out has still not been answered, after more than four decades of pertinent research...

It is concluded here that attempts to fit models or formulae to the question of student retention are likely to remain unsuccessful because too many factors and variables, interacting with one other in an unpredictable and idiosyncratic fashion, are involved. It is also suggested that the problem of retention in ODL is overstated. However, efforts to improve retention should still be made where this is possible by concentrating on voluntary reasons for withdrawal, and having the fundamentals of institutional operation right. Finally, most will be gained by operating a fair and open, learner-centred and learner-friendly, excellent academic organisation.

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