



Obtaining High Retention and Completion Rates in a New Zealand ODL Environment: A Case Study of Strategies Employed by Information and Library Studies Faculty at The Open Polytechnic

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Abstract

Open and distance learning (ODL) provides unique challenges for student retention and course completion. In an increasingly competitive educational environment, measures such as retention and completion form the basis for the evaluation of institutional and student performance. Information and Library Studies (ILS) faculty at the Open Polytechnic achieve and maintain consistently high retention and completion rates across their faculty-taught ODL courses. This research documents the development and application of strategies that contribute to these high success rates.

Information and Library Studies faculty, through a framework of action research, undertook an analysis of implementation strategies designed to support student retention and completion. This framework provided a methodological foundation for focus-group discussion. The faculty evaluated and disseminated the strategies derived from these focus-group discussions across other ILS courses in an iterative process of application and analysis.

Strategies for retention and completion in this research are discussed in the context of course selection, orientation, layered support, communication between students and faculty, support between student and faculty, social interaction, and community building in an ODL environment.

Keywords: completion; distance education; retention; student success

Introduction

The external publication of educational institutions' performance in league tables, together with an increasingly competitive educational environment, has placed retention and completion at the top of the agenda in many New Zealand educational institutions. There is a growing tendency to

associate high dropout rates with poor institutional performance (Ashby, 2004). The implications for government funding and student experience are costly for the institutions in question. Retention strategies are, increasingly, focusing on the issue of how to retain students from a very wide variety of backgrounds (Ashby, 2004).

Educational institutions that use elements of ODL practice in their course delivery generally experience lower reported rates of retention and completion than institutions operating in face-to-face teaching environments (Simpson, 2004). Research by Levy on the persistence of students enrolled in e-learning courses supports this statement, “students attending e-learning courses dropout at substantially higher rates than their counterparts in on-campus courses” (Levy, 2004, p. 185). Dropout rates are believed by some to be 10 to 20 percentage points higher than in a face-to-face teaching environment (Carr, 2000; Diaz, 2002; Frankola, as cited in Berge & Huang, 2004).

The purpose of this research is to explore the strategies that the Open Polytechnic’s Information and Library Studies faculty employ to achieve and maintain consistently high retention and completion rates. Rates for courses in these programmes range from 80% to 96%; these are amongst the highest at the Open Polytechnic. The School within which these courses sit averages 69% across all courses. Open Polytechnic students study by distance, and usually part time. Information and Library Studies faculty have chosen to analyse, synthesise, and discuss their strategies in light of the consistently high retention and completion rates they achieve.

This study uses the framework of action research to gather and synthesise data. The process of action research allows for the cyclic gathering, analysis, and application of findings relating to the central research question. This central research question asks what strategies contribute to the high retention and completion rates in this discipline area.

Background

The tertiary sector in New Zealand

In 2010 the Government published the *Tertiary Education Strategy (2010–2015)*, which set out their strategic direction for the next 5 years (Ministry of Education, 2010b). This education strategy provides the context for developments and priorities in the New Zealand tertiary education sector. Following on from this strategy, the Tertiary Education Commission (TEC) has issued education performance indicators which enable comparisons to be made based on four factors: how many students are successfully completing their courses, how many are completing their qualifications, how many are progressing to higher-level study, and how many are being retained in study (Tertiary Education Commission, 2010a). Qualification retentions are categorised as “the proportion of students in a given year that complete a qualification or re-enrol at the same tertiary provider in the following year” (Tertiary Education Commission, 2010b, p. 5). These factors illustrate that the strategy is strongly aligned with qualification and course completions, as well as retentions.

The Open Polytechnic context

As with other higher education institutions in New Zealand and elsewhere, the Open Polytechnic faces commercial and competitive pressure to show a return on funding investment in the form of tangible quantitative outcomes. One of these tangible performance and funding measures is based on completion and retention rates. While these rates have always been a focus, there is a new emphasis on how to better meet student needs in light of both the Tertiary Education Strategy and the educational performance indicators.

The Open Polytechnic of New Zealand is this country's only dedicated tertiary distance education provider. It occupies a unique position in the New Zealand polytechnic sector. Its emphasis is on open and distance learning as well as research in online and distance learning environments. The Open Polytechnic's primary method of delivery for student learning material and supporting resources is a mix of print and web platforms (Open Polytechnic of New Zealand, 2007). Moodle, an open-source course management system, is the preferred learning management system and provides the basis for a well-developed Online Campus community for the Open Polytechnic student body (Fisher, Chipinduku, & Maathuis-Smith, 2010). All ILS courses provide support and resources for students via the Online Campus.

The research context

Context pertaining to the ILS faculty, programmes, student body, and course delivery has been provided to frame our discussion of research findings. Strategies for retention and completion discussed in this research include factors such as course selection, orientation, layered support, communication between students and faculty, support between student and faculty, and building social interaction and community in an ODL environment.

Programme structure and delivery

Information and Library Studies faculty form part of the School of Information and Social Sciences. The ILS programmes cover two key but disparate professional areas of information management: library management and records management. There are 15 individual courses within the programme structure of two degrees, three diplomas, and two certificates. Enrolments in these 15 courses number approximately 220 equivalent full-time students (EFTS) annually.

All courses are defined as web-based, meaning that the courses “require students to access the accompanying online materials and resources. Access is **required**, as online participation is required” [original emphasis] (Ministry of Education, 2010a, p. 93). Within this definition there is a range of practice, varying from courses that provide print materials with online support and resources to those delivered completely in digital format. The variations in delivery are designed to make the most of the type of content being disseminated, as well as making judicious use of new and existing functionality in the Online Campus learning platform.

The ILS programmes occupy a unique place in the New Zealand tertiary environment. The Open Polytechnic provides the only undergraduate qualification in information and library studies. This may suggest a restricted or captive audience and it is true that, with few options to study elsewhere, students are more likely to focus on completing these programmes successfully. However, there are undergraduate ODL options in Australia (for example, at Charles Sturt University) and a post-graduate option at Victoria University of Wellington. The faculty that teach ILS at the Open Polytechnic do not assume that enrolled students will be retained and complete qualifications—they actively engage in strategies to ensure that this is the case. Additionally, one first-year course in Information Literacy is a core course in the Bachelor of Applied Science and many of the courses can be taken as electives in other majors in the Applied Science, Arts, and Business bachelor's degrees.

Information and Library Studies faculty

The following is a brief overview of the collective professional and academic experience of the ILS faculty. The impact of this experience and how it has shaped student interaction in an ODL environment is also addressed and provides an important foundation for our discussion of retention and completion strategies.

Information and Library Studies faculty have a wide range of experience in academia and the professional sector. A number have held academic positions in both face-to-face teaching and distance education institutions. Collectively, they have amassed more than 50 years' teaching experience in ODL. Their collective experience and qualifications provide a comprehensive foundation for the self-analysis and practical application of the principles, challenges, and opportunities afforded through an ODL environment. Faculty stated that their wide range of experience in learning and teaching has provided a sound understanding of the issues, benefits, and potential pitfalls of a number of different educational delivery modes. This awareness translates into how they manage students in their current distance teaching. Faculty members practice a student-centric approach to deliver their courses. One ILS faculty member stated:

Interestingly, the whole time I have been a teacher, I have also been a student. My experience of learning at different institutions, across various levels of qualifications and modes of delivery have informed and influenced my values, beliefs and practices about what it means to be a teacher. So my study informed my teaching and my teaching created situations for learning.

Salmon (2003) also believes that this type of student understanding is a desirable component in an ODL teaching environment. Salmon's table of e-moderation competencies that are important for faculty recruitment lists personal experience as an online learner as the number one valued competency. Flexibility in approaches to teaching and learning is also deemed desirable, along with empathy with the challenges of becoming an online learner (Salmon, 2003).

An awareness of what it means to be a student in an ODL environment, as well as a theoretical understanding of the pedagogy of teaching in varying distance education models creates a unique context for engaging with their student body and developing strategies to inform best practice in the areas of retention and course completion. A faculty member stated:

My teaching experience and 'hands on' professional experience/practice are closely intertwined, I teach what I apply myself in the marketplace. This has enabled me to provide students with up-to-date advice, and an excitement for the profession. I have found that students respond to a teaching style that demonstrates knowledge of the real world rather than a purely theoretical approach.

Information and Library Studies students

The ILS student demographic has been fairly consistent since the programmes were established: the majority of students (between 79% and 93%, depending on the sub-programme) are female, and 75% are over the age of 30 (Cossham & Irvine, 2009). There is still the same "extremely wide spread of students, whose abilities, degree of understanding and needs for support vary enormously" (McCahon, 1999a, p. 12). Some students have previous tertiary study experience and careers in other fields, while others are starting off for the first time on a serious career pathway (Cossham & Irvine, 2009). Most study part time, and work part time or full time as well, frequently in libraries or information management positions. Although this does not necessarily give them direct employer support (Cossham & Irvine, unpublished research), it does give them substantial industry knowledge and commitment to both the profession and to their studies. Both undergraduate degrees offered through the Open Polytechnic are recognised as pathways to professional registration by the Library and Information Association of New Zealand Aotearoa (LIANZA). The records and information management diploma is recognised by the Records and Information Management Professionals Australasia (RIMPA). There is therefore an incentive for students to successfully complete and use the qualifications towards professional registration and recognition.

Methodology

The examination of strategies to support retention and completion in ILS faculty practice was developed through a framework of action research. Action research is a form of self-reflected enquiry used by practitioners in social situations to improve the rationality and justice of their own practice (Wilkinson, 2000). Action research is usually collaborative and undertaken by the practitioners without involvement from outside researchers (Wilkinson, 2000). Action research has been chosen as the vehicle of study because it affords an opportunity to engage in an emic, holistic, and interpretive way with the research population. Within a framework of action research, both elements (action and research) progress concurrently. New knowledge is generated, informing action which recursively informs research (Rowley, 2004). This process is demonstrated in this research through the collection, synthesis, and action cycle undertaken by the ILS faculty.

The ILS faculty and programmes form the research population in this study. Faculty participated in a series of focus-group discussions which centred on the individual strategies employed to enhance retention and completion rates in their taught courses. The strategies discussed in these focus groups were collectively assessed by group members and, where applicable, integrated into other ILS faculty-taught courses. The success of the applied strategies were evaluated in subsequent focus groups and modified or discounted depending on measurable success towards higher retention and completion rates. The data derived from these focus groups forms the basis for analysis, discussion, and recommendations in this research.

As noted by Pickard (2007), when using action research caution must be exercised in the generalisation of findings beyond the bounds of the defined research population. Each educational environment, student body, and faculty practice is unique and contains many contextual variables. Transferability of findings in this research must be considered within the context of these variables.

In presenting these research findings, contextual information has been provided to clearly position the research population under study in the wider academic environment. Key supporting literature has been intertwined to frame observations and documentation from focus-group sessions. The integration of the literature through the documented research findings supports the iterative process of action research by closely aligning the body of knowledge with discovery which, in turn, informs the direction of further inquiry. There is, therefore, no separate literature review.

Definitions

The definitions of *retention* and *completion* are multi-faceted, complex, and further complicated by the different measures adopted by respective organisations (Berge & Huang, 2004). There does not appear to be one internationally accepted model for defining and calculating retention in an educational environment. This, however, has not deterred retention from becoming a major measure of institutional performance, even though there is not always parity between institutional data. The current body of knowledge on this topic uses various terms to discuss the concept of retention: *dropout rates* and *student persistence* are two such examples. These terms have been used interchangeably in the reviewed literature to indicate the percentage of students who complete their course and all assessment activities.

In this research *completion* is defined as the submission of all assessment components in a course, irrespective of actual pass or fail. A course is a single subject paper, usually completed over one semester. A programme is a series of courses which, when successfully completed, leads to the award of a qualification.

This research defines *retention* as the continued participation in a course to completion. The retention rate is usually expressed as a percentage (rather than a raw number) and is calculated from the total number of students enrolled in a course or programme at the beginning of the enrolment period. Data drawn from the Open Polytechnic's student management system is used to calculate the retention rate statistics for each offering of each course.

Strategies for retention

The following section synthesises the conversations held in focus-group settings to discuss the strategies that faculty believed contributed to the high retention and completion rates in their ODL courses. This data is integrated with literature pertaining to retention and completion to situate the research findings within the wider body of knowledge.

Student retention and completion in distance education is a very complex issue. Berge and Huang note that “in higher education, the problem of a student's lack of persistence is complex and multi-dimensional” (2004). Students withdraw from courses for a number of different reasons. There is often a combination of academic and non-academic reasons involved in these decisions, many of which are out of the parent institution's control and influence (Simpson, 2004). McGivney also notes, “There will always be some students who do not complete It is a fact of life that people's choices, aspirations and circumstances change” (2004, p. 45). In 2010 faculty conducted an informal follow-up review of students who failed to complete one of the ILS courses. The results of this review supported Simpson's and McGivney's viewpoints. Students who withdrew from the course were contacted by the course leader and, without exception, indicated that neither the course nor the lecturer was the reason they did not complete.

Choosing the right course

A study of the factors influencing learner progression in further and higher education institutions has concluded that choosing the right course is fundamental to learners at every level (Comfort et al., as cited in McGivney, 2004). Rovai also notes that “investigating student characteristics and skills prior to admission makes it possible for institutional support staff to identify students who are likely to benefit most from support services and who need to be monitored” (Rovai, as cited in Nichols, 2010, p. 97). Information and Library Studies faculty use a number of strategies in their engagement with students to ensure the right study pathways are being chosen. This also ensures that students who require additional support enrol with those wider support mechanisms in place.

This is more complex than it sounds. There is not necessarily direct (or even indirect) contact by faculty and study advisors with students when they first enrol—only complex enrolments or multiple course enrolments trigger awareness amongst faculty of the need for additional advice about study pathways. When this occurs, faculty liaise with Open Polytechnic Programme Advisors to devise clear pathways through required courses while incorporating electives of the student's choice. Information is provided about programme pathways; it outlines the content of different courses at the appropriate level of study, and gives advice on likely or probable next courses, especially for courses at level 5 (first year).

Transition to higher education

As well as identifying strategies to identify at risk students, Barefoot (2004) reminds us that there are many potential causes for student drop-out, and that average or even above-average students may also benefit from special assistance during the sometimes difficult transition to higher education. Strategies used by the ILS faculty to minimise this risk include redirecting students who are struggling with study skills into either a level-5 information literacy course (one of the

ILS courses), or into the Certificate in Tertiary Studies Skills, which helps students develop a broader range of basic skills (including how to study by distance).

Many generalised academic supporting resources are also provided both in print and online (e.g. guides and assistance with referencing styles), as well as a referral system that links students to student learning services and provides another layer of support for those at risk. Faculty promote these resources directly from individual course pages in the Online Campus environment.

Orientation in an ODL environment

Moxley, Najor-Durack, and Dumbrigue (2001) argue that retention is about more than just completing the course: it is about supporting students to become successful learners who are able to meet their study goals. To help students become successful learners, strong student communities are paramount. In face-to-face learning environments these student communities are often cemented during an orientation process. In the traditional sense, orientation is an opportunity for new students to meet staff and familiarise themselves with the campus and its services. In online or distance modes of education, orientation can still perform this function. Siemens (2002) states, “students new to online learning need time to acclimate to the environment”. Many students come to distance or online learning with preconceived ideas and expectations, which may be based on prior educational experiences. Orientation can be seen as a way to “help students reframe their expectations, attitudes, and feelings about the next step in their educational journey” (Moxley et al., 2001 p. 78).

Orientation can also be used as a time for students to appraise the course content and to meet fellow students and faculty. The content of an orientation resource or session should meet student needs to support their transition into tertiary distance learning.

The strategies employed by ILS faculty during a student orientation period vary, but all aim to encourage engagement with the course resources and participation in course discussion forums. Ongoing strategies to reinforce orientation are employed throughout the semester and include print, phone and online communication between student and student, and course leader and student. A major focus of these communications (for first-time students in particular) is how to study and learn online. This includes information on how to access online course pages and resources, how to use the online discussion forums, and the importance of netiquette when working in the Online Campus. The ILS student community is based on interactive discussion forums provided for each course through the Online Campus. Students are encouraged to use these forums to share their ideas and workplace experiences with their fellow students. This again generates a sense of engagement.

A printed newsletter with profiles of relevant faculty is also mailed to all ILS students and is replicated on the Online Campus. An initial welcome posting by each course leader is disseminated via email through the Online Campus. Students are also encouraged to post introductions or work through ice-breaker activities in course discussion forums, and to update their student profiles. Study-group forums are developed to allow students in different geographical areas to create their own communities for personal and academic collaboration and support.

One of the key findings from McCahon’s research was that personal knowledge of students by tutors increased students’ “sense of identification with the programme and the likelihood of their completion” (1999b, p. 3). A personal profile database was trialled in one course to help faculty better understand their student body. This was compiled using the Online Campus Moodle database function and replaced the student profile forms that previously had to be filled in by hand and posted back to the course leader (with a consequent very low response rate).

Information and Library Studies faculty collectively noted that while the Polytechnic provides a wide range of general information for students, the information is very dispersed and could easily be brought together in the online environment to create a more structured student orientation session or resource. This material includes such things as how to use the online campus, exercises in library literacy, and programme-wide introduction forums with icebreaker activities. This initiative has been noted as an area for further development, requiring wider institutional support and input.

External support for students

The layering of external support for students is also important. The body of knowledge on adult learning notes that having a supportive family or partner significantly assists the motivation and persistence of adults engaged in programmes of study. Often these programmes of study demand a considerable amount of time and financial and psychological commitment (McGivney, 2004, p. 42). McGivney (1996, cited in Asbee & Simpson, 1998) also outlines three factors that particularly mitigate student withdrawal. These factors are: good support from partners, family, and friends; good contact with the institution; and good contact and support from other students. Faculty discuss their engagement with the ideology of layered support through the creation of initial contact strategies for students. One faculty member states:

Working with material I obtained from the Communication lecturers, I created a pamphlet entitled *Helping your Student*. The content of this pamphlet was based on the work of Ormond Simpson (1998). The intention was to provide an official document which students could hand to family, friends, and employers to gain their support. Marketing staff are currently working with this document and it is intended to become part of the wider student support materials.

At the time of this research, this resource was still under development.

Communication between students and faculty

Communication between student and faculty is paramount in any strategy which aims to support retention and completion. Moxley et al. (2001) state:

Student retention and persistence ... is a product of students forming strong relationships with educators and education staff. Particularly with members of the teaching staff who are devoted to holding on to their students, facilitating their success and helping students to achieve those educational aspirations and outcomes ... (p. 82).

Information and Library Studies faculty noted through focus-group discussion that personalised communication (especially for new-to-study students) enables them to identify with a real person rather than an email address. Feedback to faculty from the student body supports this. Many stated that a strong and friendly lecturer presence made a significant difference to their student experience. In some cases, this presence made the difference between continuing with their studies and withdrawing from the programme, especially in instances where there were no personal problems to otherwise hinder student progress.

Faculty use a variety of methods to communicate with students and strongly emphasise that communication in a distance environment should not be a 'one size fits all' approach. Not all students prefer the same channels of communication, and some for their own reasons will be unable to use some of the channels available. The Open Polytechnic systems provide a number of channels for communication, including class email distribution lists managed through the Online Campus. There is also a free-phone number for students to contact their lecturers directly, thus removing the barrier of cost to this form of communication. Students are encouraged to contact their course leader if they face any difficulties. One-to-one email communication between

students and lecturers provides a parallel option to both phone and class emails. Faculty members noted through the focus-group discussion that students ask questions at any time of the day or night (even if answers are provided only during working hours).

Students also use the course forums to discuss aspects of the course and their learning. This is strongly encouraged by this faculty group, both to improve student engagement with the course, and to manage large student numbers in individual courses. Faculty then have the option of collating responses to several student queries with a single answer woven into a collective response. Print newsletters are also sent out to students: these provide an alternative form of contact and ensure that information is available to those students who may not manage well in the online environment. A faculty member notes:

I am a great believer in empathy, building up trust, approachability, communication, and positive and constructive feedback as fundamental strategies for success in teaching and retention of learners. The course [at entry level and often the first course students take in the programme] has week-by-week automated postings. These have detailed guidelines on what to study and time management. These newsletters are sent to the students via the online campus directly to their email inbox. This has the effect of looking like personal communication from their teaching staff.

Strategies such as following up on students who have not logged into the Online Campus a few weeks into the course were also implemented. These students are sent an individual email and letter via post. The letter outlines the benefits of using the online campus and explains the need for them to check that their contact details are correct. This contact usually prompts those who are reluctant to use the Online Campus or feel hesitant about the course to login and engage with the course content. Alternatively this communication prompts them to contact staff to ask what their options are (e.g. transfer or withdrawal). Faculty note that this strategy often helps to open the lines of communication, and that students seem to appreciate the individual contact.

Faculty also found that some ESOL students prefer email communication over verbal communication such as phone calls. Email allows ESOL students to read information slowly and repeatedly if required. Focus-group discussions noted that tailoring communication channels is a very important strategy for retention and completion:

I usually respond to students using the method of contact they employed to contact me. For instance I have had students with strong listening and talking skills, (aural learning style), who prefer to call on the telephone, and ask questions, rather than write emails or online forum messages.

Information and Library Studies faculty stated that using a range of channels can be difficult in very large classes, especially if a significant number of students prefer phone calls.

Communication channels are also prone to change, depending on the types of queries the student has. The choice is often difficult to predict until the strengths of the individual students are known. Different aspects of teaching are also better suited to different communication channels.

For one course, I ask students to email me complex questions that require a detailed response, and to either set a time to talk to me, or call me when they get the email. This enables both of us to be well prepared. I also take emailed questions that I think are relevant to the whole class and post them to the discussion forums along with my response (without identifying the student who asked the original question).

Providing feedback

Providing students with individual as well as group feedback is one of the more personal and tailored ways of communicating with students in an ODL environment. It is most often

associated with feedback on assessment and group work. Lamer (2009) believes that providing timely feedback is the first critical strategy in reducing the feeling of isolation that leads to lower retention rates for online students. The relationship between feedback, engagement, and retention is also supported by Goleman (1995) who emphasises that feedback should be specific and explicitly provided to ensure that the student understands how and why they did not do well in an assignment. He also notes that if feedback is seen as criticism, the result could be precisely the opposite of what is normally expected: emotional backlash accompanied by resentment and a strong sense of distance.

This feedback can occur even before an assignment is due. One of the strategies discussed in the focus-group sessions was the availability of resources to assist students to actively engage with and complete assessments. Most ILS faculty now provide a breakdown of marks well before the assignment due dates to show students exactly how marks will be allocated to each component of an assignment. Feedback from students has been positive, with students confirming that it takes out much of the guesswork when it comes to interpreting assignment questions.

Post-assignment feedback includes using standardised tightly controlled marking criteria and marking sheets for faculty and adjunct faculty to help ensure consistent and appropriate feedback for each student. This is balanced with individual feedback by the marker, and course feedback has shown that students appreciate the personal and direct marking style rather than generic statements. It removes the fear that they are ‘just a number’ and motivates many to adopt the changes suggested in their next assignment. This in turn leads to better marks, which help build confidence.

Using students’ names when giving feedback and communicating in public forums is also noted by faculty as a strategy towards retention.

I have noticed that well-timed and constructive feedback can set a student on a path to success in future courses. I think it is important to take the time to offer personalised feedback early on in the study pathway. I find that the marking of the level 5 courses, and in particular the marking of the first entry-level course for students, takes a lot of time. Over the years I have encouraged adjunct faculty markers to use constructive feedback techniques in their marking.

Student-to-student support

Students in open and distance learning often feel they are studying on their own. Boyle, Kwan, Ross and Simpson state, “There can be particularly acute issues in the distance learning environment where students often report feelings of isolation, little sense of connection and belonging, and are challenged to maintain engagement in and motivation for learning” (2010, p. 122). Creating opportunities and frameworks which encourage support between students was another important strategy identified by ILS faculty towards retention and completion. Faculty have used elements of functionality in the Online Campus to create a number of channels and resources for student-to-student support.

The formation of geographically based study groups or online communities can help maintain motivation and create a solid social student environment. Strong points were made by faculty in focus-group discussion about the need to instil guidelines on appropriate netiquette. One faculty member noted:

... one terse student email can inhibit student-to-student interaction for the rest of the semester. Students frequently do not realise how their typed messages come across on forums, and may need a gentle reminder that it’s a public setting, not person to person private communication.

However, written communication via forums is encouraged, especially as a way of sharing different experiences in varied workplaces, and to reduce the individual direct questions relating to the same issue. Boyle et al. (2010) note that older forms of student support, such as student-to-student mentoring, may still have much to offer when it comes to increasing engagement and retention. One interesting example of this is demonstrated by the following comment made by a faculty member:

Students using the frequently asked questions (FAQ) page started to show ownership of the course by responding to each other's queries. This led to social interaction and became an example of student-to-student support. This interaction also exemplified the adult learning principles of recognition of prior experience and respect from the other students.

Other ILS faculty members noted that students were also using the forums to talk with each other to identify pieces of information not otherwise readily available to them. Examples included identifying the types of practices and standards used in different types of libraries. Faculty believe that this encourages students to share experiences and knowledge (creating a wider pool of shared information) and, at the same time, to participate in the course in a more social and interactive way.

Social elements were also identified as an important factor in improving retention and completion rates by ILS faculty. Online Campus resources such as the synchronous chat sessions can be used to develop the social element of the class. Students can ask the course leader to set up a chat so that a study group can work together. Study groups, especially those that meet face to face, are also a useful device to provide support to students, and some larger libraries have organised such groups to support employees who are enrolled with the Open Polytechnic. One ILS faculty member noted:

My course has an exam and students are encouraged to use the chat room facility to facilitate revision sessions. These sessions served to create a social learning experience for revision. One semester, I monitored who participated in the chat and noticed that overall these students achieved better results in their exam than those who did not participate.

Conclusion

The purpose of this research has been and continues to be to explore strategies employed by participating lecturers in their teaching practice to maintain consistently high retention and completion rates in ILS courses. Faculty, through focus-group discussion, have synthesised teaching practices which they feel lead to high retention and completion rates in their taught courses. The action research framework employed in this study was designed to uncover, examine, synthesise and disseminate the strategies used by this group of faculty to maintain high retention and completion rates within their unique setting.

The complexity of reasons for student engagement and student retention has been noted both in the literature and in the experience of ILS faculty when dealing with their students and courses. No one factor, on its own, accounts for the majority of success in student retention, but a combination of factors, which meet a combination of needs for a majority of students, will go a long way towards maintaining student engagement. The paper highlights key strategies deemed to be important for high retention and completion rates.

Recommendations

A key component of action research is to derive recommendations to guide future decision-making, to use these in practice, and to re-evaluate the outcomes arising from these actions. Recommendations arising from this research include a range of strategies for further action. It is

noted that one of the most important aspects is that faculty should be lifelong learners themselves, preferably with participation in and an understanding of e-learning. This creates understanding of and empathy with the student experience.

1. Faculty should participate in e-learning as learners, if possible.
2. Students should receive good pre-enrolment advice to ensure their course selections are relevant, they are fully aware of the commitment involved, and they are motivated to complete the qualifications.
3. Employers and families should be encouraged to create supportive work and home environments. One strategy is to send information leaflets about ODL studies directly to them.
4. Orientation should be carefully planned and use introductory newsletters, encouraging forum comments by the course leader, and ice-breaker activities to make students feel part of the group. Students who do not participate should be followed up after the first 2 to 3 weeks of a semester.
5. A range of different communication channels should be used to allow students a choice, and social interaction and student-to-student support should be actively encouraged.
6. Thoughtful, personalised feedback should be given when marking assignments, particularly in first-year courses.

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