ENHANCING ACCESS AND SUCCESS: CATCHING THE EARLY WALKER IN ODL SYSTEMS AND POTENTIAL ANTECEDENTS OF RAPID STUDENT EXIT FROM DEGREE PROGRAMMES AND RETENTION STRATEGIES

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ABSTRACT

Early walking within a few months of recruitment in Open and Distance Learning is a cause for concern and warrants an in-depth investigation in order to enhance access. This study sought to explore potential causes of student dropout and strategies to catch the early walkers in ODL with reference to the Zimbabwe Open University. The study employed a descriptive survey design and was both quantitative and qualitative. The questionnaire used as a data-gathering instrument had both closed and open-ended sections. A sample of 76 students and 17 tutors was extracted using the purposive sampling method. The study found out that lack of faculty induction, once off orientation, lack of requisite ODL study skills, degree programmes failing to meet student expectations, getting low marks in first assignments, cause student dropout, among others. The study recommends that ODL institutions need to increase orientation time, carry out faculty induction, increase student interaction time through group tasks, improve teaching and learning pedagogy by tutors, improve assessment techniques, use of modern technologies and following up students who fail to attend weekend schools.

Keywords: open and distance learning; student retention; early walking

BACKGROUND

There is an increasingly neglected aspect of the management of student retention, namely the identification of individuals who are most at risk of abandoning their degree courses within a few weeks or months of entering university (Bennett, Kottasz and Nocciolino, 2007). Open and Distance Learning (ODL) universities face a challenge of early student withdrawal if they fail to address to the demands of the students. Although the antecedents of student withdrawal during a full academic year or entire degree programme have been investigated extensively (Medway & Penney, 1994; Martinez, 2001; Bennett, 2003) but research into students’ decisions to quit just a few days or weeks after enrolment has been sparse. This is unfortunate because early walking can account for a substantial proportion of an institution’s four-year student attrition. ODL gives learners control of the time, place, and pace of learning, often being characterised as flexible learning. However, this flexibility goes hand-in-hand with procrastination and non-completion.
As a result, the efficiency of the educational process is of importance to ODL providers, government funding agencies, and learners themselves.

In the business-related departments in London Metropolitan University, for instance, about 12% of the 2004 autumn intake disappeared within 30 working days of the beginning of term, and a further 7% withdrew within the next four weeks (Bennett, Kottasz and Nocciolino, 2007, p. 110). Early withdrawals that result from student dissatisfaction are likely to result in negative word of mouth (Keaveney, 1995; Grace & O’Cass, 2001; Michel, 2004), which might deter others from choosing to enrol at the university.

Retention in ODL is comparatively poor in most ODL universities in America, and in some contexts embarrassingly poor. The available literature about successful interventions to improve retention would not fill a very large volume. After a review of 10 years of ODL research, Berge & Mrozowski (2001) identified student retention as an obvious problem that had not been researched to any great extent. The Learning and Skills Council (2002, p. 20) defines withdrawal as follows:

A learner should be considered to have withdrawn from a programme of study where he/she is known to have made a decision to withdraw from the programme of study, or transfer from a full-time to a part-time programme, or from a part-time to a full-time programme. In addition learners should be considered to have withdrawn where they have not attended classes for at least four continuous weeks, excluding holidays (unless there is auditable evidence of an intention to return).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS
Models and theories of retention

There are quite a number of approaches to retention and having an idea of these will provide a framework for ODL systems retention strategies.

Tinto’s Interactionalist theory

One of the main theorists on retention is the American educational researcher, Vincent Tinto. Tinto developed his "interactionalist theory", according to which a student was most likely to stay in the course when there was a match between their own academic goals and motivation, and the academic and social characteristics of an organisation. Thus, for example, if a student wanted to become a teacher, and could see how a particular course with its blend of education and their chosen subject would help them achieve that objective, then that would have a strong motivating effect; their chances of completing would increase even more if they felt valued and supported.

A key element of the model is integration: a student who enjoys the subject, receives good marks, and feels that their study is contributing to their goals as described above, is academically integrated. Social integration is also important, in the form of friendships and enjoyment of the university experience. Tinto (2000) cites five conditions that best promote retention:
1. Having high expectations of students.
2. Clearly explaining institutional requirements and providing good advice about academic choices. Many students are not clear about their plans, and need help in building a road map.
3. Providing academic, social and personal support, particularly in and before the first year.
4. Showing students that they are valued. Frequent contact with the staff is important, especially in the first year.
5. Active involvement in learning – "students who learn are students who stay". Social learning, where students learn in groups, is particularly valuable, and can help foster friendship, which is another factor that encourages student persistence.

Tinto stressed that to take retention seriously is to take education itself seriously. Elsewhere (1997) he stresses the importance of the classroom as "the crossroads where the social and the academic meet. If academic and social involvement or integration is to occur, it must occur in the classroom". In ODL systems, the classroom is anywhere, at any point, where the student and the tutor can engage in meaningful interaction. Collaborative learning is a particularly good way of achieving social integration.

Institutional habitus

Thomas (2002) draws on Tinto’s theory to develop her own concept of "institutional habitus". Thomas grafts the concept of institutional habitus onto a description of the academic and social experience which the University of Keele attempts to create, showing how the favourable impression created assists retention.

- **The academic experience: attitudes of staff, teaching and learning and assessment.** Teaching and learning is given a high priority, different learning styles are supported and diversity of backgrounds is appreciated. Tutors are friendly, helpful and accessible. Assessment gives students the opportunity to succeed, and staff are available to help.

- **The social experience: friendship, mutual support and social networks.** Thomas noted that one factor in her students’ persistence was the fact they felt more at home with their university and non-university friends. Universities can facilitate friendships by providing appropriate living arrangements, by appropriate social facilities and finally by the teaching process, which should also foster team building and group learning.

The student life cycle

The above models stress the importance of the student’s integration within the academic community. Other approaches look at stages in the student life cycle where the student is particular vulnerable: pre-entry and admission, and the student’s first year.

- **Pre-entry and admissions** – Prior to entry, ensure that all stakeholders (students, teachers, career advisers and family members) are fully aware of all options. Research has shown that many early leavers do so because of an unsuitable course. The admissions process can prove very stressful for students without a family background in higher
education, so it is very important to explain all the options carefully (HEFCE, 2001; University of Ulster, 2008).

- **First term/semester** – Research has shown that students in their first year are particularly vulnerable to drop out. It is hence important that induction should not be limited to the first week. Students may experience difficulty making the transition between the more formal teachings at secondary school to the requirement for independent learning in ODL systems. This needs to inform the design of teaching and learning.

**Early intervention**

For Alan Seidman, enhancing services is not sufficient. He sums up his approach by a formula:  

\[
\text{Retention} = \text{early identification} + \text{early intensive and continuous intervention}
\]

Intervention must be early and preferably at admission – half way through the first semester is too late. It must also be continuous until the person has remediated the problem. It is the responsibility of the college to determine the prerequisites of the course, and the faculty to support the acquisition of the necessary skills.

**The causes of the problem**

There is usually a combination of interacting reasons that lead people to withdraw prematurely from a programme of study (Cullen, 1994). Many students come to university ill-equipped with the requisite study skills. Particularly vulnerable are those students from families without a background in higher education. In ODL systems, there is a considerable transition from the school learning environment to one where they are increasingly responsible for their own learning. Universities themselves may appear alienating, impersonal and judgemental, especially if there is little attempt on the part of faculty to get to know students. Similarly, the bunching together of assignments at the end of the first semester creates a huge pressure point and disappointment if grades are poor.

Finance is a perennial problem, particularly for students from poor backgrounds. Financial problems typically affect students later in the academic year (Yorke, 1999; Bennett, 2003). The latter has led to students ending up with massive debt. Ending up in the wrong course is another reason for dropout: many students don’t really know what they want to study and are discouraged when they find their chosen course uncongenial. Family pressures can also cause problems, for example caring for a sick relative. Mismatches between the learning styles of students and lecturers or tutors (Entwistle et al., 2000) will not have had time to exert dispiriting influences on students’ morale during early contacts because in ODL systems, weekend school tutorials are scheduled after the orientation programmes. Feelings of ‘belonging’ to a course or institution will not have developed and ‘bonding’ will not have taken place (Chapman & Sawyer, 2001).

Mere exposure to university-level academic norms and standards might cause some of them to realise that they are ill-prepared for undergraduate work (Nonis et al., 2005). Travelling times to university weekend school tutorials might be longer than the student had anticipated (Billington, 1984; Keaveney, 1995) especially students who come from the far end in rural areas. If the
individual’s first impressions of fellow students are negative (McGrath & Braunstein, 1997) especially on the orientation day and if tutors appear to be unfriendly (Tinto, 1993) during programme or course orientation, early walking is likely to take place.

Students sometimes withdraw shortly after enrolment in order to switch to another university, consequent perhaps to disagreeable early experiences in the institution initially attended or because a degree programme does not look as if it will live up to expectations. Switching might reasonably be anticipated to be more prevalent among students who received poor advice about their choice of degree programme (Medway & Penney, 1994) or who selected a course haphazardly (Martinez & Munday, 1998). Apart from switching to another university, a student might quit in order to enter full-time conventional universities which have adopted a component of distance learning in the name of block release programmes (Lauer, 2002). Further factors explored by the academic literature on (general) student retention which might possibly contribute to early walking are as follows:

As noted by Gibbs (2004), some enrollers for an ODL study programme have no intention of completing because withdrawal often takes place before the student has engaged with the course at all and with most withdrawal taking place before the first assignment.

**Approaches to retention**

There are a great range of approaches to retention, most of which are geared towards fully integrating the student into the university environment. Some examples are given below.

- Induction
- Monitoring attendance
- Providing personal tutors, mentors and pastoral support
- Identification of students at risk-early warning signs
- Contact between staff and students
- Assessment
- Teaching and learning styles
- Nurturing friendship among students

**RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

**Research design**

The research employed the descriptive survey design. Babbie (1997, p.62) says ‘descriptive survey is a method of research that describes what we see over and beyond’. Thus the researchers chose this method as it allowed lecturers and students to say exactly what they conceived methods and strategies that can be used for improving student retention in ODL institutions. The study was largely qualitative by nature. It is argued that qualitative methods can be used to uncover and understand what lies behind any phenomenon about which little is yet known (Strauss and Corbin, 1990).
Sample and Sampling procedure

The population for this study was lecturers and students who were coming for weekend schools. The sample comprised of 20 lecturers and 50 students purposefully sampled. Patton (1990, p.169) argues that “the logic and power of purposeful sampling lies in selecting information – rich cases for study in-depth”. This study focused on respondents who had knowledge and lived experiences of the ODL and who were willing to take part in the investigation (Flick, Kardorff and Steinke, 2004).

Instrument

The open-ended questionnaire was used as the main data gathering instrument. Open ended questionnaires gave respondents an opportunity to elaborate on issues asked (Cohen and Manion, 1994). The researcher then has to make sense of all the responses given, construct appropriate categories and then code the categories so that the data can be analysed. Open-ended questions are the most important questions on the survey by offering important and unpredictable insights into human behaviour (Burton, 2000). It is suggested that open-ended questions allow for more detailed expression of student views (Sander & Stevenson, 1999; Fung & Carr, 2000).

Procedure

The questionnaires were distributed to the sampled tutors and students at the beginning of weekend school tutorials and were collected at the end of the sessions. This was done in order to give respondents enough time to answer the questions in full. Permission to administer the questionnaire was sought from the responsible authorities.

Data analysis

Data was analyzed using qualitative content analysis. To ensure accurate interpretations and analyses, the researchers examined responses from the open ended questionnaire to come up with the main themes. Overriding themes were generated. Content was analyzed following the research questions.

RESULTS

Causes of early withdrawal

Personal factors

Respondents highlighted that problems related to time pressures are particularly acute for those adults who are studying while trying to hold down a job or fulfil domestic commitments. Sometimes complete withdrawal is not intended but happens because, after a period of interruption, students fear that they may not be able to catch up with the work (McGivney, 1996).

Distance of the learner from tutor

Many people are attracted to open and distance learning precisely because their work and/or family circumstances preclude any other kind of learning. However, the pressures inherent in
these circumstances can lead to a temporary or permanent cessation of a learning programme. The length of time it takes to complete a distance learning programme can also play a part in non-completion. To complete an Open University first degree, for example, is expected to take about four years. In that time, adults’ circumstances, interests and priorities may well change. Lack of regular face-to-face access to tutors that contribute towards maintaining people’s commitment in conventional education settings use is a cause for early withdrawal (McGivney, 2004, p. 37).

Gender differences

Some typical gender differences in completion patterns have been identified. Women students often experience acute conflict between their domestic and student roles (Hayes, 1999). In her study of non-completing Access students, Cullen (1994) found that 50% of women students had experienced physical and/or verbal abuse from male partners while they were on the course (Edwards, 1993).

Course-related and institution-related factors

Dissatisfaction with a course or institution is also a common reason for non-completion, and if this is on top of a range of external constraints and pressures, there is a strong likelihood that students will abandon a programme before completion (McGivney, 2004, p. 39).

Inadequate pre-course information and guidance

Respondents said that the wrong choice of course was a highly significant factor in early withdrawal from further and higher education programmes. 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. Specific difficulties identified were:

- Course differing from that which was advertised: units changed or modules discontinued.
- Course content differing substantially from that which was expected.
- Other qualification routes preferred with hindsight, but not known about at the time (Comfort et al., 2002).

Research indicates that many adults have difficulty obtaining full details and guidance on content, timetabling and workload programme prior to entry. Many also rely on the information and advice received from friends, family and colleagues rather than from education or careers guidance workers (Sims, 1995; McGivney, 2003a). As a result, some are ill prepared for the level of study involved in an ODL qualification programme. Some students in particular may be under-prepared. (Dinsdale, 2001; Universities and Colleges Admissions Service, 2002).

Managing study time

ODL students learn in their own time and at their own pace possibly receiving less guidance on the day-to-day or weekly input of work required. Without the discipline of classes, lectures or
seminars at set times; they can easily yield to competing pressures and lose the habit of maintaining regular study time.

**Difficulties in settling in and integrating into the life of an institution**

Lack of integration into the life of an institution and isolation cause early withdrawal for open and distance learners. People are more likely to continue with any endeavour if they are members of a friendly and supportive group and if there are regular and pre-determined times set aside for that activity. The comparative isolation of open and distance learners who are not part of a learning group and who have to make time to study at home in the face of myriad competing demands is likely to have an impact on long-term persistence. Moreover, if there are no links between the content of a course and the nature of one’s job and other regular activities, there may be no-one to share ideas and learning experiences with on a daily basis. This can reinforce a learner’s isolation (Utley, 2002).

**Institutions that are not ‘adult-friendly’**

Some mature students feel alienated when their existing skills and experience are not taken into account or when their outside commitments are ignored. The timetabling of weekend school tutorials or lectures can make life very difficult for adult parents or those employed. Cancelling orientation or tutorials or re-scheduling these without any prior notice causes problems. Such practices can cause resentment and disillusionment and precipitate early withdrawal.

**Lack of support**

ODL systems do not offer the same amount of support that students received in their previous learning environment, and this can come as a shock to some. A survey of students conducted by the Open College Network of Central England (2002) found that most respondents considered higher education ‘less flexible, less accommodating and less supportive’ and students felt that they were ‘thrown in at the deep end’ (Gentleman, 2002). Similarly, Comfort et al. (2002) reported that students moving from high schools had difficulty in adjusting to the higher education learning environment and the large amount of independent study required. Adults are easily discouraged when teaching staff do not get to know them, show little interest in their work or make disparaging comments on assignments.

**Strategies to catch the early walker**

**Effective tutors**

Respondents highlighted the need for effective tutors. Friendly, interested and helpful tutors who provide one-to-one support and prompt, regular and constructive feedback on performance are crucial to learner persistence (Turner & Watters, 2001). The personality and attitudes of tutors can be more important to mature students. As they are the main or only persons with whom students will be in contact about their work, the quality of tutors’ feedback and advice can have a decisive impact on progress and persistence, as the following testimony from a non-continuing Open University student suggests:
With ODL, there’s no place to hide! If I were turning up to a particular building each week along with others, the tutor would be one among many factors pulling me into continuation or pushing me away. As it was, as an isolated learner unenthused by the printed materials, and with other pressures on my time, I needed someone to remind me of why the course was worth doing—and what the benefits would be. My tutor did not succeed in doing this over the phone (and frankly, did not even try).

A supportive learner group

Group solidarity is important for those who are in a minority in a learning environment and who, because of work or family commitments. The formation of local study groups or circles can help to maintain the motivation of such students. Students can be organized into learning groups, both within classes and via the curriculum. Establishing learning communities, which are interdisciplinary clusters of courses linked by a particular theme, and which overlap in teaching and assessment.

Prompt follow-up of those at risk of non-completion

Respondents highlighted that effective follow-up action and support at crucial times can help to prevent complete withdrawal. The National Audit Office (2001) found that adults welcomed being ‘chased’ about attendance and perceived it as evidence of staff showing an interest in them. The study found that follow-up was most effective when conducted very promptly, by telephone rather than by letter. Sending class notes and handouts to students who have been unable to attend classes for a while has been found to prevent complete withdrawal.

High-quality course content and presentation

The quality of course content and the overall presentation of course materials are extremely important for learners who are studying on their own. If the content of a programme is considered boring and uninspiring, the incentive to persevere will be low.

Providing formative assessment

One of the reasons why students leave is because they become disheartened when they get low marks. Students should receive adequate preparation, expectations should be set out clearly, and feedback should be prompt and clear (Thomas, 2002: p. 439). There should be more formative assessment, because this gives students a feel for how they are doing without formal grading (Yorke, 2002).

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study concludes that students drop early due to personal factors, institutional factors, quality of tutors and tutorials, lack of support, among others. Quality assurance support services must be effective in order to help retention of students in ODL systems. There is need to support students in their early days through regular induction workshops on the operations of ODL systems. Such
workshops would help them to share their experiences and, in the process, learn from one another on how best to survive in ODL. Tutors also need to be equipped with retention strategies through training, seminars and workshops. Follow-up strategies have to be made to early walkers in order to increase completion rates. District centres have to be increased to increase chances for student group discussions and student-tutor interactivity.

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