<title>BRIEFING PAPER</title>

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Improving Student Retention

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Background

Improving student retention is still an important issue for any and all open and distance education providers. The OECD average dropout rate for higher education students is 30%. The UK's average HE non-completion rate in 2014 was 18%. The Open University UK (OU), Britain's largest teaching institution, with 173,889 undergraduate students enrolled in the year 2016, at one point had 25 per cent of new students and 22 per cent of experienced students choosing to dropout during the duration of a course.

Low retention rates can be used as a public measure of poor performance, and can be potentially damaging to academic reputations. The associated loss of revenues can be significant too. One UK distance learning college with more than 4000 students recently measured its drop-out rate at 15%. Halving this rate would increase their annual income by £750,000.

On a personal level, tutors and students can take it as a blow to their self-esteem, and novice students are particularly vulnerable to this issue.

So, why do students drop out, and what can be done to reduce the rate?

Why students drop out

Research undertaken by the OU on their own student base suggests that the vast majority who withdraw still aspire to earn a credit for the course/award upon which they embarked. Their reasons for dropping out however are multi-dimensional and varied. Not all are financial. Declining personalisation with tutors being allocated to cover more students is another trend that is currently causing concern.

Inappropriate course choice is one of the main recorded non-financial reasons for dropout, but the main reason stated by students themselves is that they fall behind in the coursework. Surveys of students who do complete OU courses, have found that 23% say the amount of time spent studying was a lot more than expected, and the majority (57%) fell behind the study calendar.

Tutorial quality is another significant issue. In one OU study, 18 per cent of students described themselves as "very dissatisfied" with their tutorials, the third most cited reason for student dissatisfaction. Six per cent stated they dropped out because they were not happy with their tutor.

The coursework contribution

There are three main sources of work for students:

1. work derived from the course materials;
2. work students wish to set for themselves (revision etc.); and
3. work involved in learning to study, write academically, research and use virtual learning environments

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The number of study hours required by the course materials, and the work involved in reaching the identified learning outcomes, is core to the workload for any course. A significant mismatch between the stated hours and the actual hours required by the materials will lead to significant stress for students struggling to keep to an unrealistic study plan.

Inherent difficulties or complexities in the subject matter itself; poor clarity, usability or navigability of the materials; excessive number and use of activities like spreadsheet use or internet searches, can also contribute to students falling behind.

Time management is implicitly bound up with the learning success (Thorpe, Mary. 2007) and there is a need to ensure that the student's perceptions of expected and actual workload match as closely as possible. Planning and managing the study effort efficiently helps, as does coping quickly with any mismatch between the student's own pace and the pace set by the educators. A lack of good study tools such as course calendars and study guides will create problems, as will the provision of an ineffective effective virtual learning environment that steals time and increases stress.

What can be done

There is no one solution to the problem of improving student retention, so the best approach is to adopt strategies that help students get the right educational experience from initial course selection through to graduation. In the rest of this briefing paper we will dwell upon two significant areas for potential improvement – the materials, and the online learning environment.

Improving the course materials

Accurate and complete *course descriptions*, representative taster materials, good alignment with industry relevant qualifications, and convenient delivery in a variety of media formats such as electronic, paper, and face-to-face, all help the initial selection process.

A *student induction programme* can also serve to welcome and orientate both new students, and those who return after taking a break from their studies.

Diagnostic materials have long been used in open and distance learning to better advise students about their study choices. There are essentially two kinds - generic, to test applicants' suitability for higher education, and course-specific, to test suitability for a particular course. Both can be either externally or self-assessed.

A *structural analysis* of your existing materials will identify inconsistencies in reading times required. Analysis of student and tutor feedback will help to identify specific areas for improvement. The goal is to ensure the materials contribute

contribute to a balanced workload that is flexible enough to fit in with each student's study plan.

One improvement option for course materials that particularly assists those studying alone at a distance, is to design more and more *useful assessments* which reward student effort with richer answers and feedback. Student achievement should be rewarded in a consistent manner that is meaningful to the student. Online feedback mechanisms tracking a student's progress against the learning objectives for a course, are popular with students. *Hyper-linking* from a specific right or wrong answer back into an exact context in the core learning text increases the richness and relevance of the feedback given. *Interactive learning objects* dealing with particularly difficult concepts in an alternative way are also popular, and are often the most cost-effective use of eLearning technologies.

Course materials should be designed and produced to a consistent *minimum standard of feature support* across the whole programme, allowing students to become familiar and comfortable with this standard set of capabilities provided by the materials.

Many of these improvements are best enabled by using a *single source publishing* approach for producing and updating them. Such an approach allows easier analysis and updating of the learning materials for all forms of delivery, leaving more time to be spent on incrementally improving them. It also improves quality by underpinning richer linking, better link management and more semantic searching and use.

Improving the online learning environment

Many institutions require all students and programmes to use one online learning environment in one way. This may simplify administration and tutoring, but is made at the expense of flexibility for the course designers and learners.

Flexibility is key in delivering successful online teaching and learning experiences to as many people as possible. When unplanned life events force students or tutors to change their mode or pace of work, flexibility in provision helps to accommodate such change and to retain them.

The ideal virtual learning environment has the flexibility to build student-centred learning environments that can be custom for each programme, study mode and each individual. This might mean providing extra help for younger or more inexperienced learners, including tools to aid self discipline in studying. It may also mean combating the isolation of distance learning with support for carefully prepared and timely emails, efficient and well edited collaboration forums, and regular and easy-to-use feedback mechanisms.

Knowing in detail how an environment is used by individual students, tutors, and collaborating groups, gives useful insight into the process of delivering a successful online learning experience. Gathering such feedback is a key function of the environment, and underpins the continuous process of quality

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improvement. It also helps institutions to set specific retention benchmarks, based on relevant performance indicators such as feedback and attainment, specific to different academic units.

The latest generation of learning environment technologies are more flexible, more service-oriented, and less 'system' oriented. They can be integrated with any open web portal or learning environment, and allow the implementation of much more efficient virtual learning designs and experiences.

Conclusion

> "The overall aim of improving student retention is to provide an experience that is so educationally beneficial that students will view the quality of their experience favourably, and persist with their studies."
>
> Peterson et al., 1997.

If improving student retention is a key objective for your organisation or programme, then careful materials preparation and the flexibility to evolve independent learning environments are important contributors to your success. One size most certainly does not fill all.

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