

Factors in the Persistence
of
Distance Higher Education Students

by
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Derek Rowlands

1st November, 2009

Abstract

Why some students successfully complete study through distance education and others do not is becoming an increasingly important question as distance education moves from a marginal to an integral role in the provision of tertiary education. The aims and purpose of this research were to: (1) compare and contrast the principal causes of attrition in distance higher education with a similar study conducted in 1986, (2) better characterise the contemporary experience of studying at a distance as a higher education student, particularly with consideration of online learning and (3) develop and test an updated model of student progress in distance education.

A new model of student progress in distance education was developed by critically analysing models from the literature and reviewing the origins of these models. Common elements of the earlier models were identified and the applicability of each element was assessed by critically analysing its currently accepted significance in recent research. This resulted in the development of a hybrid model consisting of elements of the models that emphasised the inherent characteristics of students and those that emphasised elements related to the learning process. The resultant model drew substantially on the model of Kember (1995), though components were added to take account of the emergence of online learning and others were removed, such as grade point average and Kember's concept of a 'recycling loop'.

The suitability of the new model was tested by surveying a group of 210 distance students at the University of Tasmania. The survey looked at study outcome (whether a student withdrew or continued/completed) and correlated this with the factors comprising the model. The data were interrogated through statistical analysis (SPSS). It was found that the majority

of the factors within the model showed some correlation to outcome. The analysis also indicated that the model had reasonable predictive value. However, the research did find that some factors did not fit well. In particular, 'motivation type' (whether the subjects intrinsically or extrinsically motivated) did not conform to the assumption in the model that students who are intrinsically motivated were more likely to continue. It appears from the findings that the type of motivation is irrelevant - rather it appeared that it is the degree of motivation that is important.

The collected data were subjected to factor analysis. This resulted in the identification to seven factors quite distinct from those used in the hybrid model developed for the study. Using this information, together with further analysis of the qualitative data collected for the study, an alternative new model was proposed and described.

In addition, the study also found that the main reasons for student attrition in distance education have changed little in 20 years despite new technologies becoming available. Indeed while online learning has solved many of the problems surrounding communication and isolation felt by most students it has caused new problems. In this study, the technology appeared to alienate a small number of students. The technology also has the potential to create unrealistic expectations about the availability of academic staff.

The qualitative part of the study indicated that poor institutional interaction (that is a student's communications, transactions and relations with university staff, systems and services) seemed to have a multiplier effect on the other factors, in that a student's negative institutional experience can exacerbate any existing adverse circumstances and cause students to withdraw. The implication of this finding was that even small improvements in students' institutional interaction could reduce attrition significantly.

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Derek Rowlands,
Hobart, November 2009



The Student (Der Student) by Rembrandt, 1606-1669
(New Carlsberg Gallery, Copenhagen)

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GLOSSARY

Attrition Rate

The attrition rate is the percentage of a cohort who fail to complete the academic requirements for a degree within the maximum period allowed.

Continuation Rate

The percentage of students who re-enrol after having enrolled during the prior regular session, semester or term.

Continuing Students

Students who having registered for a course and have completed at least one unit in one semester, enrol in at least one other unit in the next semester.

Correspondence Education (also C— Study, C— Course)

Correspondence education was the first generation in the evolution of distance education. With the advent of standardised postal delivery in the mid to late 1800s interaction between learners and teachers at a distance became possible for the first time. In the United States, correspondence became known later as "independent study" and "home study" before becoming recognised as part of the expanding field of "distance education." Interaction by surface mail is still widely used, especially in less developed countries. In the UK and Australia the term was used concurrently with 'external study' for many years.

Course

In this study, the term 'course' is used mostly in the Australian and British sense, i.e. a series of units studied comprising the work required for a degree, often in a pattern or sequence. It is synonymous with 'program' in American terminology. At the university where the research was conducted, programs of study leading to a degree are called courses. In a few contexts, such as citing North American studies, the term has been used with the US meaning of 'a unit or module of study' and this should be clear from the context.

Discontinuing Students

Students who have not yet completed the program/course for which they are registered and have enrolled in at least one unit in a semester and then do not re-enrol at all in the next semester. In the US literature such students are often termed 'drop-outs'.

Distance Education

Teaching and learning in which learning normally occurs in a different place from teaching. Some commentators stress that distance education is characterised by industrialised teaching and learning techniques such as planning, division of labour, mass production, automation, standardization, and quality control. Moore (1972) defined distance education as ‘the family of instructional methods in which the teaching behaviours are executed apart from the learning behaviours ... so that communication between the learner and the teacher must be facilitated by print, electronic, mechanical, or other devices’ (p. 76). Commentary and analysis in distance education seems to be characterised by confusion over terminology and by a lack of precision regarding the areas of education being discussed or what is being excluded, for example the following terms are often used to describe this mode of education without differentiation: distance education, correspondence study, home study, external studies, independent study, off-campus study, and sometimes open learning, as well as many more. In this paper, many of these terms have been used when citing the work of other authors—the same term being used as that used in the original text. Also, *remote study* is often used in this paper synonymously with distance education.

Drop-out

Drop-out is used to describe a student who leaves an educational institution before completing the normal course or program of study, regardless of the reasons or conditions. In some literature (from the US) a distinction is made between drop-outs and *stop-outs*. A stop-out being a student who either intends not to return to their studies or through a prolonged absence has shown no intention of doing so. Drop-out is often a pejorative term and has generally been avoided in this paper.

Dropout

To dropout is the verb used, particularly in American literature, to describe the action taken by students when they discontinue their studies before the completion of a course or program. When used, there tends to be an implication that they do not plan to return to study in the near future.

External Study / External Students

These terms are usually used to describe study undertaken off-campus or describing students who studied away from the physical campus. They originated at the University of London in the late 1800s in relation to students who were registered to take the examinations of the university at remote locations and who were not enrolled as students. It became a common term at universities in the UK and Australia during the 1960s.

Full-time Students

Students who are enrolled for more than half the usual study load.

Graduation Rate

The percentage of students in a cohort who enter at the beginning of a course/program (or transfer into a course/program) and then go on to graduate.

Non-completion /Non-completers

Students who do not complete all the units required for a course and do not re-enrol. Non-completers are the same as stop-outs as defined above.

Non-traditional students

Students, who because for some characteristic such as study mode, ethnic background, or age of entry, do not share the characteristics of the majority of the body of students.

On Campus Students

Students who are taking more than half the usual study load through units offered on campus.

Open Learning

Open learning is an imprecisely defined term often used synonymously with distance education and is a popular term in countries, such as the UK, where distance education is seen as an alternative to a mainstream system that has traditionally been closed and elitist. It is also used synonymously with *open education* a term which emphasises systems where institutions allow students to enter/be admitted regardless of their educational background.

Part-time Students

Students who are enrolled for half or less the usual study load and who are studying on-campus.

Remote Students

For this study remote students were defined as those students who maintain a residential address more than 30 kilometres from a campus of the university and who are enrolled in any mode other than full-time internal.

Retention Rate

The retention rate is the percentage of a cohort of students enrolled in a program who will graduate or are still enrolled.

Program

Program is used here in the American sense of a series of units study comprising the work required for a degree, often in a pattern or sequence. It is synonymous with 'course' in Australian and British terminology. At the university where the research was conducted, programs of study leading to a degree are called courses rather than programs.

Student Attrition

Student attrition is the phenomenon of students enrolling in a program, completing one or more units and then failing to re-enrol and complete the program. The opposite of attrition is retention. Sometimes the term is used in relations to single units/course rather than programs. Attrition is often discussed in terms of the percentage of students not completing a program, eg 'attrition rate'.

Student Progress

Student Progress is a general term that includes any discussion or conceptualisation of student retention and student attrition.

Student Retention

Student retention is the phenomenon of students enrolling in a program, completing at least the minimum requirements, and either completing the program or being on track to complete the program. The opposite of student retention is student attrition. Sometimes the term is used in relations to single units/course rather than programs. Retention is often discussed in terms of the percentage of students completing a program, eg 'retention rate'.

Unit

A set of lectures, seminars, tutorials, lessons or practical sessions on a particular topic and the associated assessment, usually studied over one semester or term. In the North American literature, 'course' is normally used for this concept.