

## **RETENTION INITIATIVES AT OPEN UNIVERSITY MALAYSIA: PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*A major challenge faced by open and distance learning (ODL) institution, of which Open University Malaysia (OUM) is no exception, is the relatively high learner attrition rate. OUM has embarked to improve learner retention through enhanced support for “at risk” learners. This initiative has evolved through a series of stages from a small scale, ad hoc kind of local interventions relying largely on lead tutors, to an institution-wide pro-active interventions implemented across all learning centres, backed by data based on evaluations of controlled experiments and driven by the management information system. This paper examines the strategies and interventions that have been implemented and the extent to which these interventions have been effective. It also looks at some future retention initiatives with a view to reduce further its learner attrition rates. The past interventions have been more focussed to “at risk” learners which include: new learners; learners with grade point average (GPA) and cumulative grade point average (CGPA) less than 2.0; and non-registered learners. So far evidence is available about the positive impact and value to learners of individual interventions under relatively controlled conditions. There is no evidence yet of the overall impact of the interventions which has been implemented. In fact, the trends in the attrition rates over the years have not really shown a marked improvement. This calls for more pervasive initiatives, involving a larger number of learners in order to see significant changes in the trend. Therefore, future initiatives will be more pro-active in nature, and will be carried out in a timely manner so that it is not too late in the course to be effective or after learners had already decided to defer, withdraw, quit or do not register. Initiatives would also be in the form of supporting and prompting tutors who are the first line of learner support to increase the magnitude, timeliness and impact of their support.*

### **BACKGROUND: THE OPEN UNIVERSITY MALAYSIA, OUM**

Open University Malaysia (OUM) was established in the year 2000 as the seventh private university in Malaysia, and since then, it has established itself as the main Open and Distance Learning (ODL) provider in the country. The primary role of OUM is to complement that of the public universities in providing higher education to the masses, in line with its motto, “University for All”. OUM’s cumulative intake stands at 65,517, while current enrolment stands at 51,319 of which 95.5% are undergraduates and the other 4.5% are post-graduates. More than half of the undergraduates (56.5%) are teachers under the special Ministry of Education-OUM education programmes, and 39% are learners in the open market Diploma and Bachelor programmes. More than 80% of learners are working adults; a majority are married, and 60% are females. A large majority (70%) are in the 30-50 age range, while 25% are in the 20-30 age range. In the last six

years of operation, OUM has seen its learner community grow from just 753 in 2001 to over 65,000 today.

At OUM, the delivery of all its academic programmes is via the *blended pedagogy mode* comprising of three main elements: *face-to-face tutorials*, *online learning* and *self-managed learning*. While the face-to-face tutorials are held once every fortnight, online learning via the myLMS platform takes place throughout the semester. For self-managed learning, learners are:

- ✓ provided with print modules, for them to read at their own convenience,
- ✓ required to go through the online resources,
- ✓ required to refer to library materials using the digital library facilities, and
- ✓ required to partake in other learning activities as and when necessary.

Learners are assessed based on tests, assignments, participation in online discussions and final examinations at the end of the semester.

While the university offers undergraduate and post-graduate programmes covering a wide range of disciplines and professional areas, it is unique in various aspects such as:

- ✓ Its entry requirement is flexible; learners only need a minimum qualification of SPM (equivalent to O Level) to be eligible for a Diploma programme and an SPM with a minimum of five years relevant work experience for a Bachelors degree programme. Recently, the Government of Malaysia has entrusted OUM to lead and implement the *open entry system*, whereby learners with an even lower qualification, which is SRP (a step lower than O Level) with an appropriate work experience and at least 21 years of age be given a chance to apply. This somewhat flexible entry inevitably affects retention, but the university values *openness* above all else, in line with its motto: “University for All”.
- ✓ Its part-time learners are given a flexible duration of up to 5 years to complete a Diploma and 8 years to complete a Bachelors degree programme. Learners may take some courses and then “*defer*”, “*withdraw*” or even apply for an “*incomplete*” status before they continue again over such extended periods. There are some who officially “*quit*” and there are also those who silently take off from the system, “*stop-out*” sometimes returning back to their studies. Again, this *flexibility* does bear some retention implications.
- ✓ Its learner support takes a very different form; learners’ main contact with the university is through the local part-time tutors who mark and assess tests, assignments and who provide support through the tutorial sessions at the local learning centres.
- ✓ Its learners are mature adults, with diverse experiences, age, background and basic qualifications.

The above uniqueness creates a situation where retention becomes an important issue. In the early years of operations, attrition rates by programmes were a cause for concern, particularly among the open market Bachelor and Diploma programmes. As the years unfold, OUM’s attrition rates stabilize to a reasonably acceptable figure of 10%, and following the year 2005, a university wide retention committee was officially set up to plan, coordinate and monitor all

retention initiatives which cuts across the whole university. The Centre for Student Management has been entrusted to take the lead role in this very important area, in ensuring that all retention initiatives are conducted in a concerted and systematic manner to enable effective monitoring and regular reporting to the University Management.

## **INTRODUCTION: OUM'S RETENTION INITIATIVES**

Recognising attrition as multi-causal, the issue of learner attrition has been addressed via a multi-pronged approach. The most crucial approach being adopted is the learner-focussed approach, which was guided by our research findings that our learners' main challenges are attributed to the learners themselves. Thus, most of the interventions have been designed to provide appropriate advising, counselling and specific study skills so as to enable them to cope with their challenges. Furthermore there has been quite a number of evidences of the success of academic interventions for "at risk" learners. A study by Turner and Berry (2000) concluded that counselled learners' academic progress and retention were better than those of the general student body, regardless of the academic status. In another study by Munsell and Cornwell (1994) they found that the more support learners receive, the more success they have in meeting their goals. In fact, student success rates were found to be greater than 50% when "at risk" learners have regular meetings with counsellors.

Of equal importance to the learners are their tutors and via the tutor-focussed approach, several initiatives have been implemented to ensure efficient teaching and learning. Learners who perform well are more likely to complete their studies. The faculty-focussed approach enhances this aspect by looking into issues related to curriculum, assessment, learner feedback and several others. OUM pays serious attention to the quality of facilities and services provided to its learners, and this aspect is tackled from the learning-centre and institution-focussed approaches. To ensure efficient coverage of support services to our distributed learners, OUM has been leveraging on ICT and to a limited extent on mobile technology as well. The institution-wide yearly priority-satisfaction survey conducted on the learners has shown that OUM has been effective in providing its programmes and services to its learners. The reasonably high level of satisfaction amongst learners is a testimony of OUM's success in meeting learners' expectations. Happy and satisfied learners are more likely to continue with their study despite having to face all kinds of challenges. This paper will take you through OUM's history of retention initiatives from the past, present and into the future.

### **(I) PAST INITIATIVES**

Since its inception, student retention is an issue that has been recognised and addressed by OUM. The initiative has evolved through a series of stages from *ad hoc* small scale local interventions to an institution-wide pro-active system implemented by OUM's own academic staff and tutors, organised and coordinated by the Centre for Student Management (CSM). Among the past small scale initiatives include the following:

- ✓ Providing channels for learners' complaints and entertain and act on almost all complaints through the establishment of Learner Services Center;
- ✓ Understanding learners actual needs and satisfaction levels;
- ✓ Providing avenues for learners to be close to the University by enlisting them in OUM's activities;
- ✓ Forming learners clubs and groups and providing support for their activities;

- ✓ Official visits to most Learning Centres and dialogue sessions with learners by the President and Management;
- ✓ Providing opportunity and avenue for old and new students interaction;
- ✓ Conducting ODL seminar and motivation talk to new learners before the first tutorial session;
- ✓ Holding counselling and learning guidance sessions for “at risk” learners at the Learning Centres;
- ✓ Conducting appropriate surveys at regular intervals for tracking changes in perceptions and satisfaction of learners on OUM’s programmes and services and
- ✓ Regular monitoring of students performance and persistence driven by the management information system

Those measures do help in making students feel being cared for and guided in their studies. However, the real impact of those measures on student retention rates could not be realistically assessed. On the whole, students appear to be happy and get the feel of being attached to the University (indicated by the 2004 Priority-Satisfaction survey results)

In the past, efforts towards improving the retention rate were not properly organised and coordinated. As a result there is no concerted effort in implementing institution-wide programmes that cut across the university. Thus, during the 2005 budget presentation session, the Management mandated the Centre for Student Management (CSM) with the task of seriously looking into OUM student retention issue.

## (II) PRESENT INITIATIVES

CSM in collaboration with various Centres and Faculties have embarked on a number of retention related programmes specially designed for certain target groups of learners. The following exercise is a review and a re-assessment of the effectiveness of the retention initiatives that are currently being conducted with a view to design and develop plans for future initiatives, which hopefully will further improve learner retention in OUM.

The following are the current facts and figures that are based on actual research that had been carried out as part of the present retention initiative:

### **(a) Data Analysis: Total intake and total active learners for 2005-2007**

An analysis of the total active and non-active learners of the combined January 2005, May 2005, September 2005, January 2006, May 2006, September 2006, January 2007 and May 2007 intakes reveals the following results (see Table 1):

- (i) The percentage of learners who did not re-register in the subsequent semester, based on the active number of learners in the previous semester (semester attrition rate) was found to be highest in the first semester of their study. This means that new learners are most susceptible to becoming non-active, particularly after first semester of the study period;
- (ii) The overall attrition rates vary with cohorts; the highest is among the Open Market Diploma and Bachelor degree programmes with an attrition rate of more than twice that

of the six Bachelor of Education degree programmes under the special Ministry of Education-OUM joint project.

(iii) The overall attrition figure of 21.5% is a cause of concern; however, it is gratifying to note that this is far below the normal attrition rate of 40-50% in most ODL institutions worldwide. The University has a moral obligation to ensure that its learners have an effective, successful experience at the University. The issues of student retention must therefore be addressed, with a view to improving student progression from the current rates. In as far as the figures show, OUM will have to intensify its retention efforts to arrest the higher attrition among the younger Diploma students.

**Table 1: Attrition Rates of 2005-2007 Intakes as of September 2007**

Cohorts	<sup>@</sup> Attrition Rate as of September 2007
MOE (6 Bachelor of Education degree Programmes)	12.5%
Open Market (Diploma and Bachelor degree programmes)	26.7%
Overall	21.5%

<sup>@</sup>The attrition figures are for learners who have gone through 1 to 8 semesters of study in various programmes

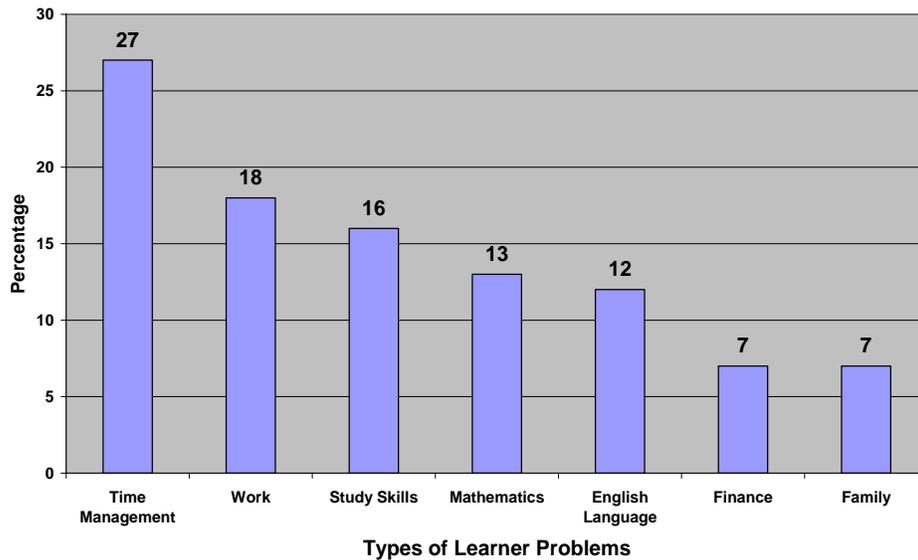
**(b) Academic advising/counselling:**

Academic counselling at OUM is more than just academic advising. In a generic academic advising activity, the academic advisor helps learners to understand all matters related to curriculum, course contents, academic administration and processes. However, for “at risk” learners, this activity goes beyond the academic boundaries by adopting a more holistic approach in helping learners to better understand themselves. “At risk” learners often do not know that they are experiencing academic difficulty and are often reluctant to seek help even if they do recognise their difficulty. Some are oblivious of their academic surrounding, unaware of the causes of their weaknesses, not well-focused and not goal-oriented. Some learners hardly optimise the use of resources made available to them. In the past, the counselling activities were carried out in groups, whereby “at risk” learners were gathered together for a counselling workshop. However, the setback of using this group approach was that learners hesitate to attend, for some reasons or other. In order to overcome the issue of non-attendance, a more personal *one-to-one* and an *outreach approach* of academic counselling was introduced in 2005. Trained tutors will call up “at risk” learners and they will meet and discuss issues that are relevant to the counselee.

**(i) Group Counselling**

The results of focus group interviews conducted at the end of a series of counseling workshops (group) held across 12 learning centres involving “at risk” learners reveal the following as major inhibitors of academic success:

**Figure 1: Barriers to effective learning (2005)**



The top five major barriers were found to be: (i) Time Management; (ii) Work; (iii) Study Skills; (iv) Mathematics; and (v) English in descending order of percentage of responses.

Examples of response for each of the above barrier are:

(i) Poor time management

- “I have no time to study.”
- “I have no time to go to the library.”
- “I have too many commitments as a teacher”
- “I work in shifts.”

(ii) Problems related to work

- “I have to go outstation often and usually missed taking tests.”
- “My boss gave me too many assignments.”
- “Too tired to read because I have too much house and office work.

(iii) Poor study skills

- “I don’t remember what I read from the modules.”
- “I cannot understand the subject matter.”
- “I cannot write my assignments well.”
- “I cannot concentrate.”

**(ii) One-to-One and Face-to-Face Academic Counselling**

As part of data collection, each counselee is required to respond to several questions regarding the challenges that they faced during their study in OUM. This was done at the end of each face-to-face academic advising/counselling session throughout the 2006 year. Data analysis showed

similar results as in Fig. 1 above. It is concluded that a large part of the challenges faced by learners are attributed to learners themselves and not the institution. This finding forms the basis for choosing the types of retention initiatives that are appropriate; and initiatives in the form of advising and counselling are intensified to help learners better resolve their own problems.

An empirical study on the effectiveness of the face-to-face academic counselling sessions held for at risk” learners yielded the following results:

**Table 2: Results of Academic Counselling (One-to-One & Face-to Face)**

Item	May 2005		September 2005	
	Treatment	Control	Treatment	Control
% learners with improvement in CGPA	51.8	30.3	54.0	27.7
% learners with CGPA>2.0	9.0	7.0	15.6	6.7
% learners who register the following semester	73.2	40.7	71.5	42.2

**Treatment Group:** at risk learners who attend the academic counselling session;  
**Control Group:** at risk learners who did not attend the academic counselling session

Table 2 shows that for both May and September 2005 Semesters, the percentage of learners with improvement in their CGPA; percentage of learners with CGPA>2.00 (out of the at risk category) and percentage of learners who re-register the subsequent semester are much higher among the *treatment group*. This set of results indicate that the academic counselling sessions conducted by trained tutor-counsellors have been effective not only in helping more “at risk” learners achieve better results (shown by an increase in their CGPA) but also in terms of encouraging them to persist in their study in the semester following the intervention.

**(c) Learning Skills Workshop:**

Improving the first semester learners’ experience has been part of a broader set of initiatives to increase learner retention and achievement in Open University Malaysia (OUM). One set of challenges faced by OUM in this respect is to help learners develop appropriate expectations initially and then to ensure that the quality of learners’ experience, once they are already in is as positive as it can possibly be. In meeting the challenges, the Centre for Student Management (CSM) at OUM has carefully crafted and designed several programmes which prepare them to be an effective ODL learners.

New learners are required to attend a one-day Learning Skills Workshop, and though it is made compulsory, attendance never reaches 100%. A study was conducted to measure the effectiveness of the workshop, and the results (Table 3) showed that:

- ✓ an average of 84% (treatment group) and 73% (Control group) attain a GPA > 2.00
- ✓ an average of 95% (treatment group) and 86% (control group) sit for their final examinations
- ✓ an average of 81% (treatment group) and 67% (control group) re-registers in the subsequent semester following the intervention

Table 3: Percentage of learners with (i) GPA > 2.00, (ii) Sitting for examination and (iii) Re-registering

Achievement / Persistence	Treatment group (%)			Control group (%)		
	Jan '06	May '06	Sept '06	Jan '06	May '06	Sept '06
GPA > 2.0	86.2	80.0	84.9	74.8	71.8	71.7
Sit for examination	94.6	96.4	95.4	79.8	86.8	92.4
Re-register	84.0	76.3	81.7	63.0	66.2	70.9

The learning skill workshop has a positive impact on both *learner performance* as well as *learner persistence*. When the likelihood of success of the new learners is increased, so will their chances of completing their undergraduate education, contributing positively to the overall learner retention.

**(d) Yearly Priority-Satisfaction Survey:**

As part of a retention initiative, yearly Priority-Satisfaction survey is conducted to seek learners' feedback, and the justifications for such feedbacks include:

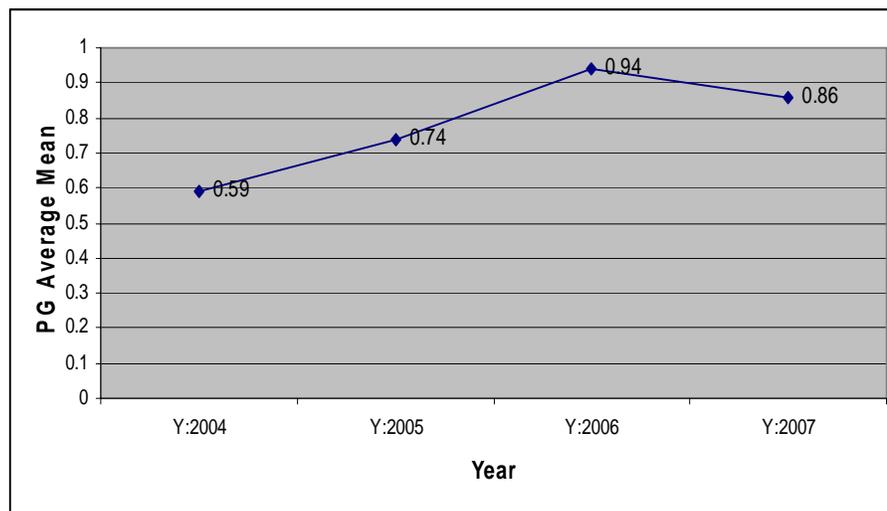
- (i) to furnish evidence that learners have the opportunity to comment on services and that such inputs are used to improve the services;
- (ii) to encourage their reflection on university learning;
- (iii) to allow OUM to benchmark and develop indicators that will allow the identification of the university's reputation in the marketplace; and
- (iv) to allow learners to provide their level of importance and satisfaction with their academic experience.

Careful attention to addressing learner concerns regarding facilities, support services and the total educational experience can pay enormous dividends in enhancing learner satisfaction. Using the

importance and satisfaction ratings from the survey results, a performance gap was computed for each item and dimension by subtracting the satisfaction from the importance/priority rating. The performance gap provides a measure as to how well OUM is meeting its learner expectations for a quality educational experience.

The administration of the survey started in 2004, and the latest was administered in July 2007. Based on the mean scores of the importance and satisfaction of the 6 dimensions of services, the average mean performance gap scores for year 2004 to 2007 were computed, and the trend is as shown in Fig 2.

**Fig 2: Average Mean Performance Gap Scores, 2004-2007**



An increasing trend in the average performance gap scores from 2004 to 2006 showed that OUM has not done enough in meeting learners' expectations, while the downward trend in performance gap scores between 2006 and 2007 is a healthy sign.

Using the Importance-Satisfaction Matrix analysis for the 2006 and 2007 results, several items have been identified as the cause of dissatisfaction. CSM will take this further by conducting focus group interviews, before the end of 2007, to gain better insights on the actual issues faced by learners in the two dimensions that warrant greater attention, that is "Learner Centredness: and "Teaching and Learning".

However, the most positive outcome of the priority-satisfaction surveys so far is the favourable general perceptions of learners on matters related to quality, choice; pride and loyalty of the university (see Table 3). Highly satisfied learners would engage in favourable "word-of-mouth"; and such "word-of-mouth" from satisfied learners would lower the cost of attracting new learners for the university and would enhance the university's overall reputation, as has been observed by Guolla (1999, p. 90) while that of dissatisfied learners would have the opposite effect (Fornell, 1992).

**Table 3: Student Responses to Issues on Quality of, Choice of, Pride in and Loyalty to OUM**

NO.	STATEMENT	% YES
1.	OUM is a University that is equivalent to other higher learning institutions in terms of quality	91
2.	If I am given the chance to go through the learning process again, I will choose OUM	92
3.	I will encourage others (eg. family, members, and friends) to study in OUM	95
4.	I am proud as OUM's student	97
5.	I will continue my study in OUM until I graduate, whatever the situation may be	98

**(e) Examination Clinics**

One of the many causes of attrition is learners' performance, particularly for new learners. It is empirically proven that the majority of new learners who do not re-register the following semester are those who had failed in one or more of the first semester subjects. This trend is also observed among the senior learners; however, the contribution of learner performance is relatively low compared to other non-academic reasons.

CSM regularly monitors learners' academic performance, by analysing the results obtained from the Examination Unit. Realizing the fact that there are some courses with constantly high failure rate of greater than 30% every semester, CSM introduced the "examination clinic" programme for learners taking "high risk" courses. When it was initially introduced, it was only conducted in a few selected learning centres. The response from learners was overwhelming, with active participation from all learners who attended. It was open to all; the idea was to encourage sharing of knowledge amongst good, average and poor learners, for on their own, the slower learners will not be able to prepare well for their final examinations. A quick analysis on the results of the high risk courses indicated that the "examination clinics" have contributed significantly to a reduction in the failure rate (~20%) among the "high risk" courses. In view of its effectiveness, examination clinics will be *formalised*, and it will be conducted at every learning centre, one week after the last tutorial. CSM will regularly and systematically monitor and collect relevant data for the purpose of conducting an empirical study on the effectiveness of this particular intervention.

**(III) FUTURE INITIATIVES**

It is important to note that attrition is a multi-causal phenomenon, some of which are attributed to the learners, and some to the institution. Hence, any retention initiatives must be multi pronged in nature. In this respect, OUM will adapt 6 different focused approaches towards improving its retention and they include: Learner-focused; Tutor-focused; Faculty-focused; Learning Centre-focused, Institution-wide focused and Technology-focussed approaches.

In general, a *learner-focused approach* deals with all initiatives that focus on the learners' needs, such as: the learning skills workshop, examination clinics and advising and counselling. A number of areas were identified for immediate action to assist current learners in progressing in their studies successfully as summarised below:

- ✓ To *officially appoint* course tutors as academic counselors to learners in their tutorial groups and to *formalise* this approach of academic counseling (providing pastoral and non-academic support) across the whole university throughout all learning centres;
- ✓ To *formalise* the Examination Clinic Sessions covering all “high-risk” courses across all learning centres, one week before the beginning of final examinations;
- ✓ To *emphasize* and make known to new learners that the Learning Skills Workshop is *compulsory*;
- ✓ CSM to *review its study skills materials and guides*, with a view to making them *available on-line* to tutors and learners;
- ✓ To make available *subject-specific study guides*, which differentiates between levels of study to reduce any miss-match of learners' expectations of what it is like to study a particular course at OUM;
- ✓ To *formalise* the Deans' List Award Ceremony across all learning centres, in recognition of the excellent performance by learners;
- ✓ To develop *portal for learners* specifically covering all matters relevant to learners;
- ✓ To leverage more on *mobile technology*, e.g. *sms to contact* “at risk”, non-active and dormant learners and to refer them to a specific officer who would offer advice/help to get them back in their studies;
- ✓ To use *sms in giving reminders* to learners about assignment datelines, final examinations, etc and the same reminders to be directed to their *academic counselors/course tutors*;
- ✓ To improve the *efficiency of the Learner Services Centre (LSC)* in resolving learners' complaints, by enhancing the Customer Relation Management Application (CRM). The second phase of development of CRM is in progress;

Tutor-focused approach considers initiatives that can be implemented on to tutors to enable them to be more effective in their tutoring duties as well as in providing pastoral care and non-academic support to learners. Through this approach, the following initiatives will be implemented:

- ✓ To effectively *train* all lead tutors, who will in turn train a larger number of tutors with a view to improving the quality of tutors, tutoring and counseling
- ✓ To update and *incorporate retention-related content* in the tutor training manual
- ✓ To involve *tutors*, other than the subject matter experts in the development of power point slides for tutorials (to be used by learners and tutors);
- ✓ To develop engaging and captivating multi-media and e-learning objects to accompany course modules in making learning easier and more fun
- ✓ To ensure effective monitoring of the *tutors interaction in online forum*; lack of interaction de-motivates learners;

Faculties play a major role in learner retention, thus faculty-focused approach considers initiatives that can be implemented by faculties to ensure learners' progression in their studies, right through to completion. The initiatives can take the following forms:

- ✓ To conduct a placement test to new learners in order to assess their *English and Mathematics literacy* skills in view of the flexible entry requirement;
- ✓ To review the assessment format, load and balance, particularly for *first semester courses*, in order to arrest the high attrition rates of the first semester learners;
- ✓ To ensure that students receive regular *formative evaluations* of, and *feedback* on their work to facilitate student learning;
- ✓ To ensure that recognition and *reward schemes for staff and tutors* take cognizance of significant contributions to student support;
- ✓ To introduce the following interventions for certain target group of learners: *remedial English and remedial Mathematics*
- ✓ To monitor the effectiveness of the use of *online TMA* in giving feedback to learners.

OUM learners are distributed in 51 learning centres all over the country. Learning centre directors and staff can play an important role in learner retention. Learners spend the whole of their study period at the learning centres, therefore the quality of services rendered can make a difference and can influence a learner's decision whether to stay on or to leave. In this aspect, the following initiatives will be implemented:

- ✓ To *formalise* social gatherings (sports/recreation/etc) of new and senior learners, tutors and Alumni early in the semester to enhance interaction and to help ease the transition of new learners to the new OUM environment
- ✓ To *formalise* dialog sessions with learners and tutors across all learning centres - preferably at mid-semester with a view to (i) resolve critical issues and (ii) to garner learner feedback
- ✓ To *formalise* regular meetings between learning centre staff and tutors at the end of every semester, to review all administrative chores and other activities before the beginning of the final examinations; and
- ✓ To further improve learning centre facilities, to make it more conducive for learning;

There are many other initiatives that the institution can partake in ensuring high learner retention and in terms of institution, the following initiatives will be implemented:

- ✓ Creating awareness on learner retention among staff has been an ongoing effort; however there seems to be a shortfall in implementation. To increase staff's appreciation of learner retention, all retention related data would be *automated* and to be made available to all staff and stakeholders;
- ✓ Capacity building for all staff involved in providing services to learners (particularly the front-liners). The Human Resource Department will have to make available more training programmes in the area of customer relations
- ✓ Yearly Priority-Satisfaction Survey has been regularly conducted to assess whether OUM is investing resources in the areas that are important to learners and also to identify OUM's strengths and challenges. The survey will be expanded to *link priority and satisfaction to learner retention and performance*
- ✓ To capture relevant *student data at the point of entry*, and keying them all into the Student Management System (iCampus), for the purpose of student retention study – to identify profiles of at risk students, and use the findings as an *early alert system*

- ✓ To use *SMS* to provide a more robust student support at critical points in learners study period, e.g. assignment dateline, examination clinics, academic counseling schedule, etc.
- ✓ To exploit the ICT and mobile technology to reach out and to provide better communication among staff, tutors and learners.

To expand a little further on the technology side, OUM's retention initiatives will also look into the utilisation of the learner's portal and mobile technology to further enhance its learner support services. Mobile telephone usage will be more widespread, whereby the appropriate and timely use of telephones can provide excellent opportunities for dialogue and counselling, and text messaging can be used by both institution and tutors to pro-actively contact learners, as described by Anne Gaskell & Roger Mills, (2004); Sweet, (1986) and Kember, (1989).

In all the initiatives proposed above, interventions only take place AFTER the "at risk" learners have been identified. One question that comes to our mind is, 'is it possible to intervene POTENTIAL "at risk" learners? Based on learners' records and using artificial intelligent technology (e.g. Neural Network), it is possible to identify potential "at risk" learners early in their study. With this information, early intervention program can be prescribed to the potential "at risk" learners. This research is expected to start in the first quarter of 2008.

## **CONCLUSION**

Over the past six years of operation and with the implementation of the various retention initiatives and interventions, research has shown that certain retention programmes have proven to be quite successful in enhancing learner performance (improvement in CGPA) and learner persistence or progression rate (improvement in the examination sitting rate and improvement in the returning rate). However, the key factor in determining the success of the institution in managing the attrition issue remains to be **QUALITY**. The foundation to retaining learners of different backgrounds, issues and needs is to provide quality education, quality support services, and quality infrastructure and quality technology. The future retention initiatives that have been formulated have taken into account these aspects of quality.

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