

Engaging the Open and Distance Learners via Online Community to Increase their Commitment to stay

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Abstract

This paper presents the findings of the research on the various interventions implemented by Open University Malaysia and their impact on its learners' level of Engagement in the Online Community. The intensity of the Online Community which is the result of the interventions was measured using four variables: Learner-Learner, Learner-Tutor, Learner-Staff and Learner-Content interaction. These variables were then correlated to two other variables; their level of Engagement and Commitment to stay. Self-administered questionnaires were distributed to 1,500 undergraduate learners of Open University Malaysia located throughout Malaysia. Results obtained from 1,116 respondents showed that there was a strong correlation between Learner-Learner, Learner-Tutor, Learner-Staff, Learner-Content, Engagement and Commitment to stay. Multiple regression analysis carried out showed that the learners' Engagement explains 72 percent of the variance of their Commitment to stay. This study concurs with many previous researches that reducing the feelings of isolation of open and distance learners can help increase their level of engagement and reduce their attrition.

1. Introduction

The demand for tertiary education in Malaysia has increased over the last decade and will continue to rise. More and more working adults are now aware that only a degree can help them gain better job opportunity and job promotion. When Open University Malaysia (OUM) were given approval to conduct distance learning programmes for working adults via blended learning mode in 2001 it became the first private university in Malaysia to do so. Prior to that a few public universities such as the Science University of Malaysia, National University of Malaysia and Putra University Malaysia have offered programmes via distance learning to working adults. Since then, other private non-traditional universities have emerged such as the Wawasan Open University and Asia e-University to meet the increased demand in higher education.

However, despite the strong demand for tertiary education, these non-traditional universities also experienced high attrition and the rate can be as low as 25 percent and as high as 80 percent. (Ng, 2010; Carr, 2000). Attrition is not a new phenomenon. It is one of the most highly researched areas in education since Tinto's first acknowledged research in 1975. High attrition affects not only the revenue of universities but also their image in terms of public's perception of their teaching quality and quality of the services provided.

Most of the non-traditional universities today have education portals which act as the nerve in providing learning and administrative supports efficiently. These portals now commonly known as learning management system (LMS) which have interactive communication capabilities can actually be used to engage the learners, lecturers and administrative staff if they are managed well. Increase in engagement of learners can lead to a reduction of feelings of isolation and hence increase their retention.

2. Research Objectives

The objective of this paper is to report on the findings of an investigation on the level of intensity of learners' participation in the MyVLE as a result of the interventions carried out by OUM. Higher level of intensity will lead to higher level of engagement, on one end of a continuum and lower level of intensity will lead to feelings of isolation, on the other end of the continuum. The engagement of learners and the continuous use and involvement in the MyVLE by learners, tutors and management staff of OUM will result in the formation of an Online Community, which will help foster a sense of community and reduce the feelings of isolation.

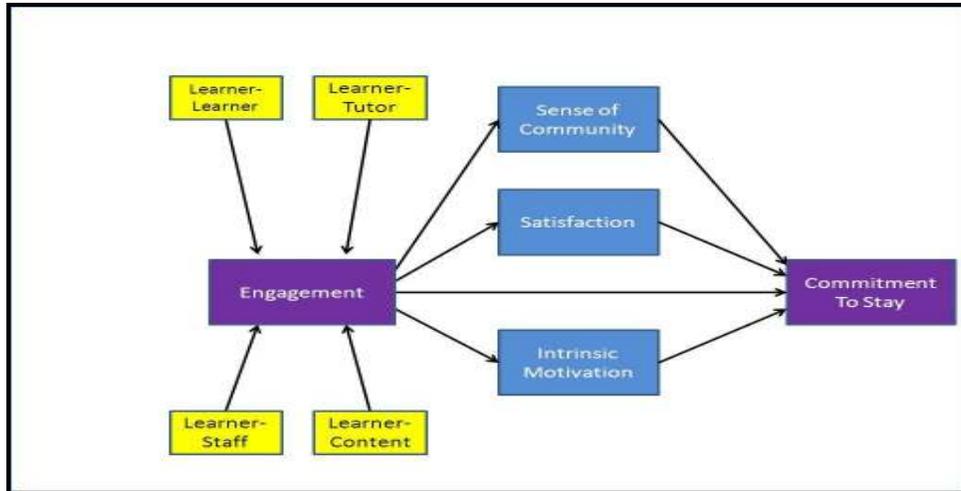


Figure 1 The conceptual model of the research

The learners' level of Sense of Community, Satisfaction, and Intrinsic Motivation are indirect output of their Engagement in the Online Community. A higher engagement level is hypothesised to produce a higher mean score of learners' level of Sense of Community, Satisfaction, Intrinsic Motivation and these have impact on their Commitment to stay in their programmes. The conceptual model of this research is shown in Figure 1 above.

MyVLE and the Interventions taken by OUM to Increase Engagement

The online discussion forum is one of the three key components of a blended learning pedagogy used at OUM, Malaysia's first open and distance learning (ODL) university with over 100,000 students to date. These learners are supported academically and administratively via its state-of-the art learning management system known as My Virtual Learning Environment (MyVLE).

According to Ali (2008), up-to-date and well-equipped ICT infrastructure is the key for ODL operations. He added that the infrastructure must also be enhanced and improved to correspond to ever-evolving technologies. The e-content development started in 2007, is one of the six innovative ICT efforts of OUM, to enhance the ODL teaching and learning experience with interactive, engaging and effective e-learning materials.

At OUM, all new learners were made to attend the pre-tutorial workshop to equip them with the necessary skills in order to survive in the open distance learning environment. They were taught on how to navigate in the MyVLE environment. They were also exposed to the benefits of using the MyVLE to help them in their studies. According to Ng (2008) and Latif, Sungri and Bahroom (2009), the concept of ODL, time management, assignment preparation, ICT and understanding the use of MyVLE have positive impact on the learners' level of readiness.

The online discussion forum implemented in 2003 is one of the components of MyVLE. Learners can interact with other learners and their tutors on a 24/7 basis and thus encourages better communication. Tutors can also use it to provide feedbacks to their learners. According to Abas and Fadzil (2009), online discussion forum has the potential to add value to the total learning environment in open and distance learning. Research conducted by Kaur (2004) on online discussion forum at OUM confirmed that learners are generally satisfied with the context, feedback, and interaction with their peers and tutors.

Kaur (2004) suggested that planned, focused and guided online discussion can result in successful learning experience. Providing feedback especially encouraging comments, pointing out errors and correcting them and using leading questions in an online discussion helps in guiding and directing

learners to follow and continue their posting. She added that providing timely feedback is important as questions posted by learners left unanswered for too long will discourage posting. Ng and Wagner (2007) in their research found that the participation of learners increased to 84% from 64% (Kaur, 2004), with the introduction of Collaborative Online Learning (COL). Ng (2008) suggested that for COL to take place, learners and tutors must be equipped with the technological know-how.

Learners were also provided with course materials in the form of html uploaded into MyVLE together with other resources such as i-lectures, i-radio, and course guide to help them. They were also supported with digital library available in the MyVLE. MyVLE is also used to provide administrative support such as course registration, exam registration, course schedule, financial information and other related matters. Learners who encounter any problem can now channel it via an online help desk known as E-Customers Relationship Management (E-CRM) where all their enquiries and grievances will be handled by a team of specialised staff attached to the Learners Services Centre of OUM.

3. Literature Review

Attrition affects both traditional and non-traditional learners. The reasons are complex and multiple. According to Palloff and Pratt (1999), Reisman (2003) and Rovai et al. (2007), attrition among distance learners are due to their feelings of isolation. Robertson et al. (2008) opined that distance education lacks activities that promote sense of community found in face-to-face traditional setting thus affect the students' success. Sense of community in online learning environment can help foster the feeling of connectedness, which encourages and supports successful learning and increases retention and graduation rate.

Tinto's (1993) Student Integration model and Bean and Metzner's (1985) Student Attrition model have suggested that learner's involvement, engagement and integration into the academic and social system of an institution are key factors in determining if the learners persist or dropout. Astin (1993) noted that the learners' tendency to drop out of college is inversely related to the degree of direct involvement in the academic and social life of the institution. He added that the strongest indicator of retention is the degree of connection to peers and faculty that a learner makes.

According to Morgan and Tam (1999), evidence from previous researches suggested that low sense of community is a result of feeling of isolation, which is related to learner characteristics associated with attrition. Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) noted that the more intensely learners are engaged and involved in their own education, the more likely they are to do well, be satisfied with their educational experience, and persist in their studies.

According to Liu and Oh (2007), successful online learning requires active participation, which otherwise will lead to isolation and disconnectedness. Higher participation results in higher sense of community. However, technology poses great challenges. They added that institutions need to incorporate community-centred approach, facilitative and supportive role, and social support network.

Kearsley (2002) concurred that a high level of interaction is desirable and positively affects the effectiveness of any distance education course. Olgren (2004) pointed out that faculty interaction with their learners have impact on learner retention rate. According to him, it is not the type of interaction that is the problem, but rather the lack of interaction. According to Brook and Oliver (2003), social phenomenon of community is becoming increasingly recognised and may be put to good use on the support of online learning. Serwatka (2005) opined that engaging students as early as possible and keeping them engaged is the key to reducing attrition. In order to engage the students, educators must be adequately prepared with the techniques and strategies needed.

Wang and Fesenmaier (2003) proposed that for an online community to evolve and prosper and bring benefits to its members, members of the community must participate actively and contribute effectively by asking questions, providing information and expertise and sharing ideas. Graves (2009) suggested that social networking and online communities can become a powerful tool in allowing members to meet, share ideas, and connect with one another. He added that organisations can use

their online communities to encourage engagement among members and as a channel for promoting thought leadership and prevent attrition.

4. Research Methodology

The research sample was drawn from a population of 39,218 undergraduate learners studying at OUM. A total of 1,500 learners have been targeted for this research. For better distribution of the samples for this research, learners from different cohorts and different locations throughout Malaysia irrespective of their course of studies have been targeted.

The instrument used in this research is a 63-item questionnaire developed by amalgamating four established instruments. These were the Sense of Community (SCI) Index (Rovai, Lucking, & Cristol, 2001) to measure the level of Sense of Community, the Job Description Index (JDI) (Smith, Kendall & Hulin, 1969) to measure the level of Satisfaction, the Intrinsic Motivation Self-Determination Theory (SDT) (Deci & Ryan, 1986) to measure the level of motivation and the Three-Component of Commitment Model (TCM) (Meyer & Allen, 1991) to measure the learner's commitment to stay in their programmes. These instruments have internal consistency above 0.8.

The questionnaire includes items measuring the level of interaction; Learner-Learner (LL), Learner-Tutor (LT), Learner-Staff (LS), and Learner-Content (LC) and also the level of Engagement of learners.

Data obtained were analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences software where Pearson Product-Moment Correlation was used to find if there is any correlation between Commitment to stay and other variables. The Independent Samples T-Test was used to find if there is a statistical significant difference in the mean scores of learners' Commitment to stay (TCM) between learners who have high level of Engagement and low level of Engagement using the median score of Engagement as the cut-off point as suggested by Garson (2008).

5. Findings

A total of 1,116 valid responses were received yielding a response rate of 74.4 percent. The distribution of the respondents for each cohort is shown in Table 1.

Table 1 Distribution of Target versus Actual Samples

Cohort	Targeted Number	Actual Number	Response Rate
Year 1	300	372	124.0%
Year 2	300	221	73.7%
Year 3	300	214	71.3%
Year 4	300	165	55.0%
Final Year	300	144	48.0%
Total	N = 1,500	N = 1,116	74.4%

Of the total respondents, 41.3 percent are male compared with 58.7 percent female. Malays made up the biggest ethnic group with 65.1 percent followed by Indians 16.2 percent and Chinese 14.5 percent. Majority of the respondents (82.4 percent) are in the 21 to 40 age group. There are 64 percent respondents who are married and 33.3 percent single. In terms of work status, 87.9 percent were found to be working and the rest were either jobless, doing own business or studying "full-time". Most respondents financed their studies through own savings.

The mean scores and standard deviations of the level of SCI, JDI, SDT, TCM, Engagement (ENG), LL, LT, LS and LC are as shown in Table 2 below.

Table 2 Mean Score and Standard Deviation of all the variables

	SCI	JDI	SDT	TCM	ENG	LL	LT	LS	LC
N	1116	1116	1116	1116	1116	1116	1116	1116	1116
Mean Scores	3.87	3.57	3.70	3.87	3.88	3.90	3.35	3.51	3.50
Std. Deviation	.43	.42	.32	.50	.51	.49	0.83	.76	.67

Results of the Pearson Product-Moment Correlation carried out to find the correlation between Commitment to stay (TCM) and other variables are as shown in Table 3 below. Gender, Age Group, Ethnicity, Work Status, Marital Status, Financing Methods and the different Cohorts have weak or no correlation with Commitment to stay.

Table 3 Pearson Correlation between Commitment to stay and other variables

	SCI	JDI	SDT	Eng	LL	LT	LS	LC
TCM								
Pearson Correlation	.798(**)	.609(**)	.693(**)	.848(**)	.608(**)	.238(**)	.389(**)	.493(**)
Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The results of the Independent Samples T-test carried out are as shown in Table 4 below.

Table 4 Independent Samples T-Test

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Diff.	Std. Error Diff.	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
Commitment to stay	Equal variances assumed	30.947	.000	30.000	1114	.000	.6834	.02278	.63873	.72812
	Equal variances not assumed			28.827	835.985	.000	.6834	.02371	.63689	.72996

Multiple Regression analysis carried out on Engagement, SCI, JDI, and SDT as predictors and Commitment to stay as dependent variable found that Engagement, mediated by SCI, JDI and SDT (Baron & Kenny, 1986) explained 72 percent of the variance of Commitment to stay.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

According to Jiang (2008), a mean score of 3.51 to 5 is considered as high level, mean score of below 2.5 is considered low and mean score of 2.51 to 3.5 is considered an interim level. From Table 2 above, it was found that the mean scores of LL and LS are all above 3.5 which are considered high. However, the level of LT and LC interactions is at the interim level which needs further improvement.

Results from Pearson Product-Moment Correlation in Table 3 showed that Commitment to stay have high correlation with SCI, JDI, SDT, ENG, LL, LT, LS, and LC according to Garson (2008). The

Independent Samples T-Test in Table 4 showed that there is a statistical significant difference in the mean score of Commitment to stay between learners who are have high level and low level of Engagement. Engagement mediated by Sense of Community, Satisfaction and Intrinsic Motivation have impact on Commitment to stay. Multiple Regression analysis showed that Engagement explained 72 percent of the variance of Commitment to stay.

Thus, the interventions carried out by OUM have impact on the level of intensity of learners in the MyVLE. OUM have successfully increased the learners' level of interaction with fellow learners, its tutors, and its staff and also with its contents. This helps to increase the level of engagement and reduce the feelings of isolation among the learners. The high level of engagement has successfully improved OUM's retention rate over the years. According to Ng (2010), OUM has a retention rate of 25 percent in 2010 compared to most non-traditional universities which have recorded attrition rates between 50 to 80 percent (Carr, 2000).

MyVLE can become a very powerful tool for retention of learners if it is managed properly. Online Community formed through the interaction in the MyVLE can encourage participation, increase engagement and reduce the feelings of isolation.

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