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MANAGING RETENTION IN ODL INSTITUTIONS: A CASE STUDY ON OPEN UNIVERSITY MALAYSIA AND SUKOTHAI THAMMATHIRAT OPEN UNIVERSITY

Latifah Abdol Latif
latifah@oum.edu.my

Sumalee Sungsi
ssungsri@hotmail.com

Ramli Bahroom
ramli@oum.edu.my

ABSTRACT

Retaining learners has always been an ongoing challenge in an ODL institution worldwide. This is no exception to Open University Malaysia (OUM) and Sukothai Thammathirat Open University (STOU). In both institutions it was found that the attrition rate is highest in the early part of their study, mainly in the first semester or year. The overall retention rate of OUM is between 65-70% while in STOU is between 50-60%. This represents a huge loss in revenue to the institutions concerned as well as a lost opportunity to learners in terms of upgrading their level of personal and career development and achievement. In response to this challenge, both OUM and STOU have undertaken various *interventions* to mitigate this early attrition problem. This paper seeks to *compare and contrast the major retention initiatives* at both institutions with a view to learn from each other's experience. The *reasons for learner drop-outs* in both institutions may be similar, however, the *strategies and action plans* formulated by each institution may differ. It would be interesting to determine the *underlying rationale* why such strategies were adopted. The outcome of this collaborative study will enable each institution to adapt and adopt *best practices in managing retention*.

INTRODUCTION

Attrition is generally regarded as a major indicator that the University is providing its learners the kind of education that they want. It is a measure of student satisfaction, performance, and development. Research has indicated that distance education (DE) learners have a higher attrition rate than their campus-based counterparts (Brindley, 1985; Parker, 1995). This represents a huge loss in revenue to the institutions concerned as well as a lost opportunity to learners in terms of upgrading their level of personal and career development and achievement.

ODL institutions have as their primary goal of contributing towards democratization of education. In other words, they have to provide education to as many people as possible. This is generally done through flexible entry requirement in order to provide maximum access to the population. This massification of education may not be realized if the attrition rate remains high in these institutions. It is thus imperative that ODL institutions address this challenge.

OBJECTIVE OF STUDY

This paper looks at the issue of learner attrition in both OUM and STOU. It seeks to compare and contrast the major retention challenges at both institutions with a view to learn from each other's experiences. The reasons for learner drop-out in both institutions may be similar; however, the strategies and action plans formulated by each institution may differ. The findings of this paper will lead to a better understanding of the practices in managing retention challenges and pave the way for collaborative efforts in retention research in the future.

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. Cumulative intake at the end of July 2008 was at 70,378, enrolment stands at 56,027 of which 95.5% are undergraduates and 4.5% are post-graduates. More than half of the undergraduates (58.9%) are teachers under the special Ministry of Education-OUM education programmes, and 41.1% are learners in the open market Diploma and Bachelor programmes. More than 90% of learners are working adults; a majority are married, and 60% are females. A large majority (73%) are in the 21-40 age range, while 25% are in the 20-30 age range. In the last seven years of operation, OUM has seen its learner community grew from just 753 in 2001 to over 70,000 today.

OUM complements the other public universities which provide education to young and fresh school leavers by making education available to the masses, particularly the working adults who aspire to improve their academic qualifications in order to secure better careers and quality life. Its main challenge lies in managing the tremendous

increase in learner numbers from one academic year to another and consequently meeting the needs of the diverse learner, who may differ in terms of: ethnicity, gender, religion, culture, prior knowledge, learning style and motivation. Its academic programmes are offered over three semesters; each semester extends over a period of 8-15 weeks. Learners are given a maximum of five years to complete a Diploma and eight years for a Bachelors degree, while for Masters and PhD, they can take up to a maximum of three and five years respectively.

BACKGROUND: SUKHOTHAI THAMMATHIRAT OPEN UNIVERSITY (STOU)

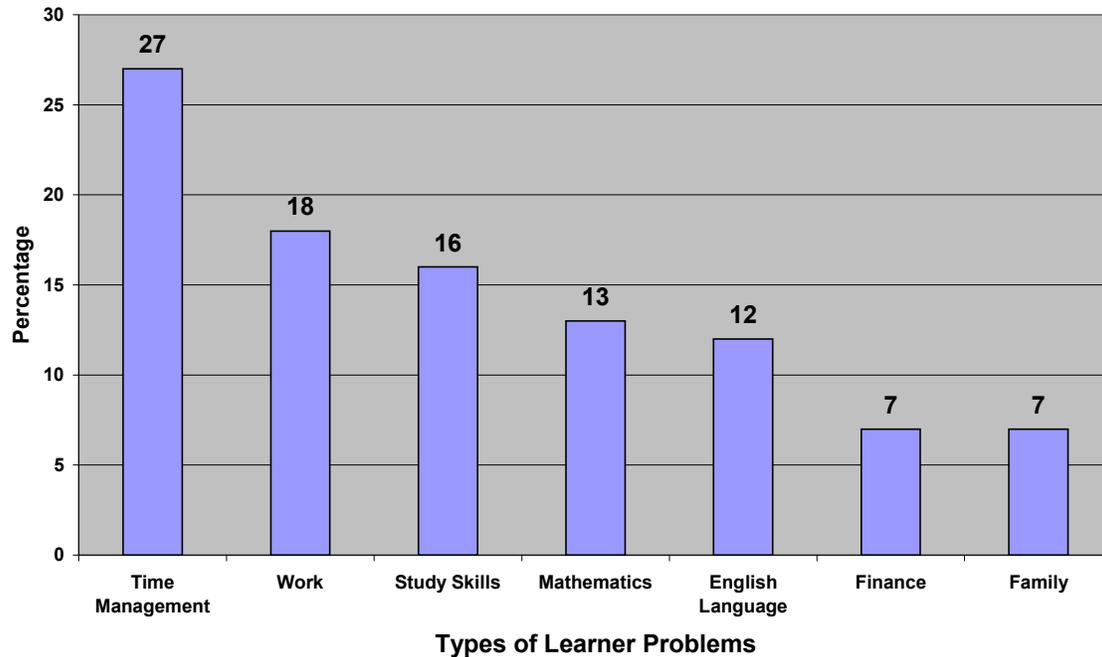
Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University (STOU) was established by Royal Charter in 1978, to provide the Thai people with increased educational opportunities at university level. As the eleventh state university, STOU has all the honors and privileges of other universities. It was the first open university in Southeast Asia to use a DE system.

As STOU uses DE methods to transfer knowledge and skills to learners, curriculum contents are arranged into self-instructional packages, which integrate related material and experience into sets known as course blocks. Each block is worth at least 6 university credits for the bachelor's degree and five for the master's degree. STOU operates on a semester basis, each semester comprising at least 15 weeks. Learners must enrol in at least one course block per semester, with a maximum of three course blocks per semester for bachelor's degree and two for master's degree. They must complete all the required course blocks within a time frame no more than three times the period of study stated in the curriculum.

ATTRITION RATES

Like other ODL universities, the drop out rate of both institutions is found to be highest among the first semester or first year learners. A number of factors have been identified to be the causes of learners dropping out. In STOU, (Sumalee S, (2008); Thanavibulchai,N (1989); Prommapun,B. (1995), research in student retention indicated that the main reasons behind learners decision to leave the university are varied, and they include the following: (i) time management - more than 90% of learners are full-time working people, they have to manage their time between work, family, social and study responsibilities. (ii) do not understand the open and distance learning concept - they are new to this concept, and they have to adjust their learning culture to fit in the ODL environment, and this is particularly critical among the new learners. (iii) learners are used to a class-room setting in which teachers and peers are around to assist them when required, but in an ODL institution, they have to be more independent, relying very much on the learning materials provided and interacting with their tutors and peers, more via online. (iv) though they are motivated, they must have strict discipline and high commitment in order to succeed every semester until they complete the courses and graduate. (v) studying in isolation is very much a challenge to them; in times of difficulty, there is nobody around to provide the advice, guidance and motivation on the spot.

Similarly in OUM, the focus group interviews held among the “at risk” learners as well as those who are “dormant” (who have not registered in more than three consecutive semesters) revealed that their main challenges are as shown in the chart below:



The biggest problem is *Time Management* (27%), followed by *Work Demands* (18%) and *Lack of Study Skills* (16%). *Lack of proficiency, particularly in Mathematics and English* also appears to be a problem. Finally being adult learners, they also have to grapple with *family* and *financial* problems (Latifah Abdol Latif, Ramli Bahroom and Jamaludin Mohd, 2006).

Even though the challenges faced by learners in the two different institutions are somewhat similar, the institutions’ challenges are different, and one particular area that has a wide-ranging impact on attrition is the issue of addressing learner diversity. The student population in STOU is many times larger than that in OUM; they are more dispersed within Thailand, and quite a large number of them are from the rural areas. In this regards, STOU faces a greater challenge in meeting the needs of its more diverse learners compared to OUM, which has a much smaller population, with a lesser degree of diversity. Meeting the needs of the diverse learners is extremely important; it will determine whether they are satisfied with their overall learning experience. Research has shown that satisfaction is highly correlated to retention. One example is based on a study conducted in Berea College (Judith Weckman, 1999) where it was found that ratings of satisfaction for various survey items, which include: general perceptions of learning experiences, academics, spiritual and personal development were statistically significantly different for persisters and dropouts. Identifying variables that influence learners’ satisfaction is therefore crucial. Looking into the e-learning component of the blended mode is also critical, as it plays an important role in influencing the satisfaction and success of distance

learners. The collaborative research in the two areas mentioned above will provide useful insights for both OUM and STOU to move forward and be the institutions of choice to the people of both countries.

RETENTION INITIATIVES

Several studies have attempted to identify the variables that contribute to learner attrition in ODL environments. Morgan & Tam found that the decision to drop out or to persist is a result of the complex interaction of both internal psychological variables and the external environment (Morgan & Tam, 1999). Garland investigated the reasons cited by learners for dropping out and placed them into four categories, namely, situational, dispositional, institutional and epistemological (Garland, 1993). Consequently, it is difficult to determine a single causal explanation for attrition in ODL.

At OUM and STOU, the factors causing attrition are mainly found to be situational and dispositional in nature. Thus, most of the interventions have been designed to provide appropriate advising, counselling and specific study skills to help learners cope with their challenges.

The retention strategies in both universities have been adopted based on substantial research, and almost all the researches can be classified into the following approaches:

1. Classifying learners according to characteristics that identify those learners who are the most vulnerable to drop-out (i.e., “at-risk”- learners with a CGPA of less than 2.00; new; defer; and dormant - learners who did not register over three consecutive semesters; and non-registered);
2. Identifying the features of courses that contribute to high or low drop-out rates
3. Getting inputs from learners who drop out, on what led to the decision to withdraw from their courses and
4. Obtaining inputs from existing learners.

I. Different Target Group of ODL Learners:

New Learners

Both OUM and STOU found that the new learners are most vulnerable to dropping out. This is a common phenomenon in most ODL institutions and a major reason for this is their unfamiliarity with the new learning environment, system and processes. As a result, special programmes are designed to help learners overcome this problem. At OUM, a one-day orientation programme is conducted for all new learners at all learning centres throughout the country, before the first tutorial begins. STOU also conducts a similar programme, across every province through out the country, to their new learners at the beginning of the first semester. In this programme, new learners are introduced to the concept of Open and distance learning, and what it takes to be a successful ODL learner. STOU goes one step further by providing a VCD containing the orientation material to all

new learners. The effectiveness of the orientation programme conducted in OUM was measured in terms of the learners academic performance (GPA>2.00); and persistence rate, which were shown to be higher among the *treatment* group compared to the *control* group (Latifah Abdol Latif, 2007)

“At risk” learners

Besides the new learners, both OUM and STOU also give special attention to “at risk” learners (CGPA less than 2.00). Besides the normal face-to-face academic counselling, both institutions have leveraged on ICT in providing e-counselling to this group of learners. Both OUM and STOU, the academic counsellors sometimes conduct phone counselling to “at risk” learners who hesitate to come for the face-to-face or e-counselling.

STOU has been capitalizing on the use of radio and television programmes to provide information and advise on how to be successful in distance learning to learners while OUM has only recently embarked on the use the Internet-radio to reach out to “at risk” learners.

Apart from the above, at OUM, “at risk” learners are issued with an auto-generated letter, requesting them to discuss with the relevant faculties on how to improve their academic performance. The serious implications of being an “at risk” learner for more than 2 semesters are communicated to them. Similarly, in STOU, letters are being sent to learners with the same purpose.

There are two main different forms of counselling activity in STOU and they are: *appointment guidance activity* and *learning skill workshop*. More than 80% of learners who use these services were satisfied, and they found these two counselling activities have helped improve their motivation and confidence level. Similarly, in OUM, counselling on “at risk” learners was found to be effective and this is shown by the higher percentage of improvement in performance and higher percentage of increase in persistence rates for the *treatment* group compared to that of the *control* group (Latifah, Ramli, Jamaludin, 2006).

“Non-active” learners

The phenomenon of senior learners not re-registering in the subsequent semester is common to both STOU and OUM. In order to maintain contact, a telephone interview is conducted on non-active learners with a view to understand their problems and provide the relevant assistance to ease them back into the system. STOU call this programme as a following-up programme or contact centre programme. This programme is presently being piloted on learners in a few provinces that are near by to Bangkok. In OUM, we found that the success rate of this intervention is rather low (5%) based on the number of learners contacted, but in terms of person numbers, it is significant.

II. Retention Related Activities:

Examination clinics

To further assist learners to improve their academic performance, OUM conducts examination clinics covering “high risk” courses, that is, courses in which the failure rate is usually high (more than 30%). These sessions are facilitated by the academic staff and just like in any other interventions, learners’ attendance is recorded and their results in the particular course are also monitored. At STOU, for courses in which the failure rate are high, different forms of tutoring are provided. They include normal tutoring, tutoring on demand, intensive tutoring and e-tutoring. Normal tutoring and e-tutoring are not compulsory; learners have the option of attending or accessing it whenever they are free. For tutoring on demand and intensive tutoring, they are organized when there is a demand from learners. The follow up study in this activity found that over 80 percent of learners who attended intensive tutoring passed their examination.

Dialogues

Feedback from learners and tutors are crucial for an institution to evaluate its performance. In both institutions, regular dialogue sessions are held between the Management and staff with learners and tutors at the learning centres. Both universities found that these dialogues have helped in making learners feel being cared for and guided in their studies. They appear to be happy and get the feel of being attached to the university.

Surveys

Another form of obtaining direct feedback from learners is through a survey. STOU has conducted numerous surveys, both on existing learners and the drop-outs. The outcomes of the survey provided the factors that cause learners to drop-out. The rationale for the various retention initiatives have been based on these findings. OUM conducts an Importance-Satisfaction survey annually. It is conducted on to all learners with the main objective of identifying areas of strengths and weaknesses, measuring learner satisfaction level in their learning experiences and monitoring the changes in the satisfaction level over a period of time.

Institutional Data Analysis

Analysis of institutional data can provide a variety of useful and relevant information that are related to attrition, and this is one area that both institutions, STOU and OUM can embark on. Various types of institutional data can be integrated and analysed, and the advantage of this strategy is that the analysis will be more holistic in nature, taking into consideration both institutional and non-institutional factors. Another big advantage of this initiative is that it does not require massive conduct of surveys, which requires a large amount of resources, money and time. At STOU, the data related to student drop

such as, the list of names of first year learners who dropped out, their academic background, number of learners attending examination in each subject and percentage of those who did not pass are collected. The analysis of these data was then used as a basis to design activities to support them and keep them in the system. At OUM, a most recent effort in this area involved looking into examination attendance, status of coursework and status of re-registration. A model was developed that showed the interdependence of completion of coursework, examination attendance and re-registration status, and based on its analysis, specific retention initiative was undertaken to improve re-registration rate of both new and senior learners.

“Institutional-Wide” Interventions

The above initiatives carried out by both OUM and STOU address mainly learner-attributed factors. However, a lot of effort has been expended on addressing the institutional factors as well. A one-stop learner services centre which caters to learners’ enquiries and problems in both institutions acts as a focal point for learners to obtain appropriate information and to gain assistance in resolving the issues they have at hand.

The results of a recent survey involving 579 undergraduates carried out in STOU (Sumalee Sungsi *et. al.* 2007) highlighted different factors that caused (i) learners who intend to drop out; (ii) learners who intend to drop-out but remain in the system and (iii) learners who has no intention to drop-out. The study proposed 12 institutional interventions to be carried out by STOU to promote learner retention. They are: (i) admission advice, (ii) orientation, (iii) learning materials, (iv) contacting with the university, (v) registration, (vi) tutoring, (vii) information services, (viii) interaction between teachers and learners, (ix) learners club, (x) counseling service, (xi) local network and (xii) evaluation.

OUM also pays serious attention to the following: module improvement, more effective tutor training, improving the teaching and learning and its facilities, upgrading physical and ICT infrastructure, and reviewing assessment in terms of load and balance to suit adult learners. Huge resources and time are spent in improving services and processes in the areas mentioned above to ensure that we meet learners’ expectations.

ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

The consideration of attrition is not as straight forward as it appears. Firstly the definitions may vary depending on what the purpose is. Secondly, despite of much interest and research that have been focused on this subject, the reasons for attrition have not been fully understood. In many cases, situational (situations that arise from learners’ life circumstances) and dispositional (personal problems that impact on learners’ persistence behaviour, such as motivation) barriers proved to be the primary causes of attrition which are non-institutional, thus there is nothing much an institution can do.

Thirdly, attrition is predominantly investigated from the institutional point of view as

opposed to learners' interest, which may not truly reflect the real motives of learners when they decide to drop-out. Institutions are usually ambitious in terms of persuading learners who have stayed away from the system to resume their studies, but the institutions' enthusiasm is sometimes not matched by learners' enthusiasm. What it implies is that a certain intervention can only be effective to a certain extent, whatever the institution does beyond that, may not entail in improved learner retention.

Fourthly, the nature of ODL institutions allows learners to pace their studies based on their preferences. In this respect the attrition figure is not necessarily reflective of the performance and quality of the institution. Finally, catering to the diversity of learners is a concern of all educators, and the challenge faced by ODL institutions in this very important area is exacerbated by the wider range of diversity as enrolment increases by the year. Nevertheless, in ODL settings, learners are continuously exposed, guided and shaped to become an independent learner; to manage and to be responsible in their own learning, and this will go a long way in helping learners cope with their studies, regardless of their diverse background.

CONCLUSION

ODL institution's primary role is to provide education to the masses. This role will not be fully realized if the attrition rate is high. ODL institutions can learn from one another on their strategies and practices on addressing this attrition issue.

OUM would like to propose that both institutions embark on an area involving the use of artificial intelligent technology (e.g. Neural Network) to identify potential "at risk" learners early in their study based on learners' records. This area of research will make use of institutional data.

The use of mobile technology is in its infancy stage at both OUM and STOU, and this is another area where collaborative efforts would bring great benefits to both institutions. The use of mobile phones in both countries is prevalent, thus this present a great potential in addressing the attrition issue. Another viable collaboration will be in the area of developing a range of multimedia and e-learning materials including the creation of learning objects.

In conclusion, as educators in ODL institutions, we should work together and focus our efforts on meeting the needs of learners; not on what is easy to deliver. The provision of excellent support and genuine concern for learners should underpin all retention initiatives.

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