

Academic Counseling as a Pro-Active Retention Initiative at Open University Malaysia (OUM)

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ABSTRACT

A major challenge of open and distance learning (ODL) institutions, such as Open University Malaysia (OUM), is the high learner attrition rate. In this regard, OUM had initiated a number of interventions in trying to minimize this rate. One such intervention is academic counseling where Tutor Counselors, conduct face-to-face counseling sessions for "at risk" learners. This paper reports on the success of academic counseling conducted for "at risk" learners in two successive semesters at OUM. In terms of academic performance, a higher percentage of learners in the treatment group experienced an improvement in their CGPAs (54.0%) as compared to those of the control group (27.7%). In addition, 15.6% of learners in the treatment group achieved a CGPA>2.0, compared to only 6.7% of those in the control group. In terms of learner persistence, 71.5% of learners in the treatment group of September 2005 semester reregistered in January 2006 semester as compared to 42.2% of those in the control group. The study found that the reasons that influence learners' academic performance are time management, work demands, lack of study skills, lack of proficiency in Mathematics and English, family and financial commitments. The study also indicated that "at risk" learners tend to exhibit an attitude of indifference towards their academic performance.

1. INTRODUCTION

A major challenge of higher education institutions, particularly open and distance learning (ODL) institutions is the high learner attrition rate. Although attrition is multi-causal, OUM's data indicate that for new learners (first year) a significant number of those who do not reregister are from the "at risk" category, that is those achieving a Cumulative Grade Point Average (CGPA) of less than 2.0. It is for this reason that OUM's retention initiatives are targeted primarily at these "at risk" learners.

The Centre for Student Affairs (CSA) has been entrusted to play a major role in coordinating learner retention programmes at OUM and its interventions are carried out according to the following principles:

- (i) They should be executed with consistency;
- (ii) They should be pro-active in nature in that they require early detection of symptoms and identification of the root causes of problems; and
- (iii) They should be concerted and cross departmental to address the social, emotional and academic needs of students.

Thus far, CSA has incorporated the elements of academic counseling in the following programmes:

- (i) Learning Skills Workshops for new learners;
- (ii) Academic advising and counseling of “at risk” learners;
- (iii) Group counseling;
- (iv) Individual counseling via e-mails, telephone and face-to-face sessions
- (v) Hands-on training on the use of myLMS and digital library;
- (vi) Examination clinics; and
- (vii) Supplementary face-to-face tutorials.

The paper describes the results of academic advising and counseling of “at risk” learners conducted at OUM, over two consecutive semesters.

2. ACADEMIC COUNSELING AT OUM

Academic counseling 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 recognize their difficulty (Levin & Levin, 1991). Many are oblivious of their academic surrounding, unaware of the causes of their weaknesses, not well-focused and not goal-oriented. They hardly optimize the use of resources made available to them.

At OUM, selected tutors are trained as Tutor Counselors to equip them with interpersonal skills, counseling skills, a full understanding of matters related to teaching and learning, administrative services and learner support services. These Tutor Counselors’ primary role is to help learners resolve their practical and personal problems. The activity is conducted at all learning centres throughout the country. The interactions between the Tutor Counselors and learners are recorded and closely monitored.

3. METHODOLOGY

At OUM, a learner’s “at risk” status was determined by a Cumulative Grade Point Average (CGPA) lower than 2.0 on a 4.0 scale at each semester. These learners are placed under academic probation and are automatically sent letters (online) signed by the Deans of Faculties to inform them of their probationary status. CSA then gets the list of “at risk” learners from the Registrar’s office, distributes the list to the various learning centres, for the attention of the Tutor Counselors and Administrators at the centres. The Tutor Counselors via telephone or e-mail or short message services will contact learners whose names appear in the list. After agreeing on a date, the learner will meet up with the Tutor Counselors. The advising and counseling are usually conducted one or two weeks after the semester examination results are released. Learners who attended the sessions are required to fill up a Problem Awareness Form. The purpose of the Problem Awareness Form is:

- (i) To review and discuss learners’ performance in their course work: Test I, Test II, Assignments, and their online participation (OLP);

- (ii) To go through a questionnaire containing 7 items to identify problems that they face during their studies.
- (iii) Information on 1 and 2, will assist the Tutor Counselors to provide appropriate advice or direct learners for further help.

The Tutor Counselors will collate all completed forms and forward them to CSA for analysis.

In May 2005 semester, the total number of “at risk” learners was 1669, which makes up 7.2% of the total learner population. As a pilot project, only 11 centres with a total of 1,056 “at risk” learners were contacted, and out of this, 332 attended the session. The second session was conducted in the following September 2005 semester in which another 484 out of 1,080 “at risk” learners from 25 learning centres attended.

“At risk” learners who attended the academic counseling session and whose names appeared in the forms were placed under the *Treatment Group*. Those who did not attend were placed under the *Control Group*.

3.1 Academic Performance and Persistence Level

Two measures were used to determine the effectiveness of the academic counseling sessions. The measures were: (i) academic performance, which refers to the percentage of learners with improved CGPA just after the intervention; and (ii) persistence level, that is the percentage of learners who reregister in the following semester.

Academic counseling is deemed to be effective in improving academic performance when the percentage of learners in the *treatment group* with improved GPAs exceed that of the *control group*. Likewise, academic counseling is considered effective in raising the persistence level when the percentage of learners who reregister in the following semester is higher for the *treatment group* compared to that of the *control group*.

3.2 Coursework Grades

In addition to determining the improvement in academic performance and level of persistence, learners were also asked to indicate their coursework grades on their Problem Awareness Forms. This exercise is for learners to review their present performance with the Tutor Counselor and discuss strategies to obtain better grades in the courses. Short and long term academic planning will ensue between the learner and the Tutor Counselor.

3.3 Problems Faced by Learners

In another section of the Problem Awareness Form, learners were asked to indicate problems that they face in their studies. The purpose of this section is to determine the factors that have caused learners to be in the “at risk” category.

4. RESULTS

The results of the above analysis for May and September 2005 Semesters are shown in Table 1.

4.1 Improvement in CGPA

Table 1 shows that for May 2005 Semester, 51.8% of learners in the *treatment group* achieved an increase in their CGPAs compared to only 30.3% of those in the control group. In addition, 9.0% learners in the *treatment group* achieved a CGPA>2.0, which means they are now technically out of the “at risk” category compared to only 7.0% of those in the *control group*.

Table 1: Results of Academic Counseling

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

The results for September 2005 Semester showed a similar positive outcome of academic counseling. 54.0% of the learners in *treatment group* achieved better CGPAs as compared to those of the *control group* (27.7%). The *treatment group* also has a higher percentage of learners achieving CGPA>2.0 (15.6%) compared to those in the *control group* (6.7%).

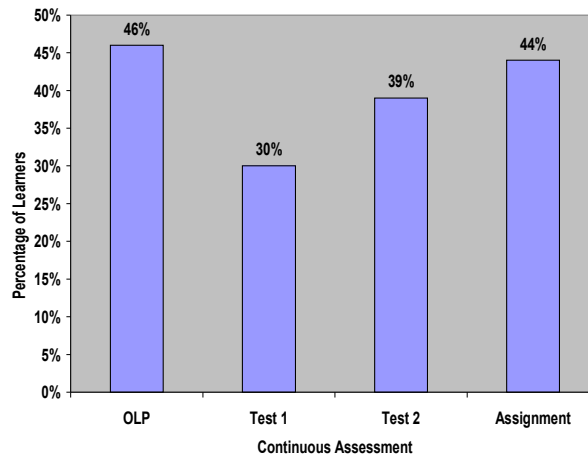
4.2 Persistence Level

With reference to the persistence level, the results (Table 1) show that 73.2% of learners in the *treatment group* of the May 2005 Semester reregistered in the following September 2005 Semester, while 71.5% of learners in *treatment group* of September 2005 Semester reregistered in the following January 2006 Semester. These percentages are higher than the corresponding percentages for the *control groups* of May (40.7%) and September (42.2%) 2005 Semesters. This indicates that “at risk” learners who attended the academic counseling have a higher persistence level compared to those who did not.

4.3 Coursework Status

Figure 1 shows the percentage of “at risk” learners who did not record any grade in their Problem Awareness Forms. “At risk” learners appear to exhibit an attitude of indifference with regards to their performance in the continuous assessment. As shown in Figure 1, 30% to 46% of learners who attended the academic counseling sessions did not have or were not aware of their coursework grades. More specifically, 46% were without their OLP grades, 30% were without Test 1 grades, 39% were without Test 2 grades and 44% were without course assignment grades.

Figure 1: Percentage of “At Risk” Learners Without Grades

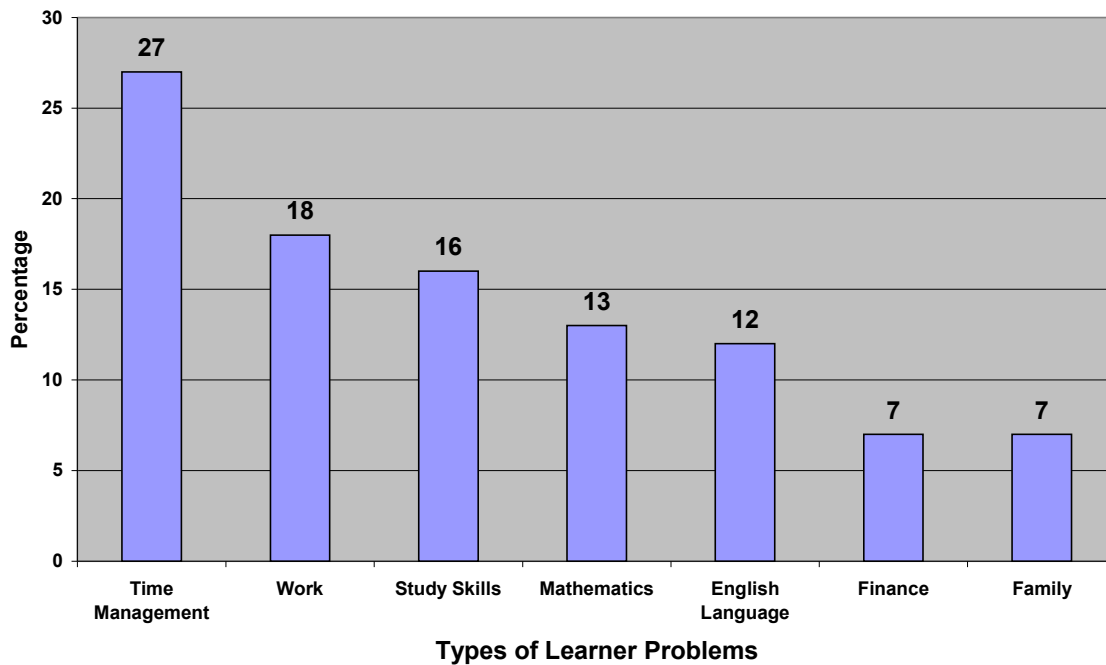


4.4 Problems faced by learners

The distribution of the types of problems indicated by learners in their respective Problem Awareness Forms is shown in Figure 2.

The biggest problem faced by “at risk” learners 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.

Figure 2: Distribution of Problems of “At Risk” Learners



5. DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

Evidence of the success of academic interventions for “at risk” learners has been variable. A study by Turner and Berry (2000) concluded that counseled 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 counselors. However, Hudesman, Avramides, Loveday, Waber and Wendell (1983) found that the counseling intervention with a “contract” between the learner and the counselor do improve learners’ GPA’s although the average increase in GPA’s did not raise the learners to “good standing” status.

A study involving a 12-week retention program designed to assist “at risk” learners with test-taking, study and career skills through individual and group counseling highlighted some positive results in terms of retention (Engle et al, 2003). However, improvement in study skills was not reported. They found that 69% of programme participants attained a CGPA>2.0 by the end of the intervention compared to 43% of the control group. In the following semester, 55% of the program participants remained successful compared to 28% of the control group. Not only did a greater percentage of the program participants improve to “good standing” (CGPA>2.0), a greater percentage stayed on.

The results of this study are somewhat similar to the findings mentioned above. Although this study indicates that there is a positive impact of academic counseling on “at risk” learners both in terms of academic performance and persistence, the extent of the impact in terms of performance is not that dramatic. This is understandable in view of the fact that changes in CGPA are more difficult to achieve as learners have to accumulate their credits.

The pockets of academic counseling sessions held over the May and September 2005 semesters which did show some positive outcomes appears to have a positive impact on the landscape of learners’ performance. The percentage of “at risk” learners have been declining from one semester to the next; starting with 22% in 2002, leveling off to about 10% for the September 2003 to January 2005 semesters and finally reducing to single digit figures (~7%) in the last three semesters.

The poor habit of not knowing or remembering their course grades, or did not take their tests and hand in their assignments is not totally unexpected among “at risk” learners. This is the most crucial point for advice. Learners are carefully guided to strategize on overcoming this bad habit to increase their chances of getting out of the “at risk” category.

The types of problems encountered by “at risk” learners are varied. It includes time management, work demands, study skills and family demands. It is gratifying to note that most of these problems are learner related and not institutional in nature; therefore helping learners to sort out their problems is the way forward. CSA’s role is to provide avenues for learners to minimize gaps that they have, such as organizing subject specific clinics, examination clinics for Mathematics-based and English courses, training in myLMS and Digital Library, etc. These elements are also introduced to new learners during an orientation programme so as to equip them with the necessary tools upfront to help them through their study at OUM.

5. RECOMMENDATION

Arising from the academic counseling sessions, the following recommendations are put forth to further improve learner retention:

- (i) Get learners to sign a “contract” or a study plan, developed at the academic counseling session, clearly articulating the learners’ obligations and efforts to be removed from “at risk” category;
- (ii) Develop a comprehensive database of “at risk” learners. It is required for research purposes, the results of which will help towards the implementation of the Early Alert System. In addition, the research results will be useful for decision-making on student needs/services as well as for institutional planning purposes;
- (iii) Use telephones (mobile phones and text messaging) as an effective medium for learner support. The appropriate and timely use of telephones can provide excellent opportunities for dialogue and counseling, 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).

7. CONCLUSION

Academic counseling at OUM encompasses advising and counseling on academic and non-academic matters. It proved to be quite successful and effective in terms of improving academic performance and the level of persistence. The success is probably attributable to the personal manner of encouraging learners to “open up” and discuss freely with the Tutor Counselors. As can be seen from the list of problems given by learners, they are mainly personal in nature. Due to low self-esteem, these adult learners would require rigorous counseling to get them out of the “at risk” category. The finding of this study is in line with the findings of Veronica A. Lotkowski, *et al* (2004), which demonstrate that the relationship between college retention and performance was stronger when academic and non-academic factors were combined.

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