Managing Retention in ODL Institutions: A Case Study on Open University Malaysia and Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University

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ABSTRACT

Retaining learners has always been an ongoing challenge for open and distance learning (ODL) institutions worldwide. There is no exception for Open University Malaysia (OUM) and Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University (STOU). In both institutions, it was found that the attrition rate is highest in the early part of a learner's study programme. This represents a huge loss in revenue for the institutions and a lost opportunity for learners in terms of enhancing their level of personal and career development. Both OUM and STOU have undertaken various interventions to mitigate early attrition. This paper reviews the major retention initiatives at both institutions so that they can learn from each other's experiences. The reasons for learner drop-outs as well as the interventions at both institutions are found to be quite similar. Despite differences in size and age, the two institutions believe they should collaborate in order to further enhance the effectiveness of their retention efforts. Several issues and challenges peculiar to each institution were identified to determine the best areas in which both institutions could collaborate in.

INTRODUCTION

Attrition is generally regarded as an indicator whether a university is providing its learners the kind of education they want. It is a measure that captures the level 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). Attrition has far-reaching implications on the individual learner, the higher education institution and the nation. For the individual learner, attrition means a lost opportunity to enhance his level of personal and career development. For the institution, it represents a loss of revenue as well as a blemish on its image and reputation. For the nation, apart from a reduction in its manpower

capability, attrition is frequently cited as a critical factor in assessing the cost-effectiveness of open and distance learning institutions in comparison to their traditional classroom-based counterparts (Keith Tyler-Smith, 2006).

ODL institutions have a primary goal of contributing towards the democratization of education. In other words, they have to provide education to as many people as possible regardless of their inherent differences. This is to be achieved through less stringent entry requirements and a very flexible mode of delivery. However, ODL's noble aim of massification of education may not be realized if the attrition rates in such institutions remain high. It is thus imperative that ODL institutions seek to address this challenge.

OBJECTIVE OF PAPER

This paper looks at the issue of learner attrition in both Open University Malaysia (OUM) and Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University (STOU). It reviews the major retention efforts of both institutions so that they can learn from each other's experiences. The findings of this paper will lead to a better understanding of the practices in managing retention challenges in ODL institutions and pave the way for future collaborative efforts in retention research.

BACKGROUND: SUKHOTHAI THAMMATHIRAT OPEN UNIVERSITY (STOU)

Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University (STOU) was established by the Royal Charter in 1978 as the 11th state university and the first open university in Southeast Asia. The distance education system adopted by STOU was viewed as the most practical method to bring about the democratization of higher education, provide equal access to education for people throughout Thailand and make the concept of lifelong learning a practical reality. It provides opportunities not only to learners but also to citizens of all ages and backgrounds, many of whom are already employed in the workforce, to continue their education for various reasons, the most common being to improve their knowledge and skills for career promotion or shift to a better job, so as to attain a better quality of life.

In December 1980, after a two-year preparation, STOU opened its doors to the first batch of learners. The 82,000 learners enrolled in bachelor's degree programmes in two schools of study, Educational Studies and Management Science. Since then, STOU has developed into one of the world's "mega" universities with about 200,000 learners (about 85% are working adults) currently enrolled in master, bachelor, diploma, certificate and continuing education programmes. At present, it offers more than 300 courses in 12 schools of study with a strong emphasis on social science.

STOU uses distance education methods to transfer knowledge and skills to learners by providing self-instructional packages sent by mail comprising textbooks, workbooks and study guides. Depending on the nature of the course, the package may also include other media such as audio tapes and VCD. In recent years, in accordance with the "STOU Plan 2000," the institution has moved from its primarily print-based model to a dual track of print-based and computer-based media. By leveraging on ICT, STOU has embarked on e-learning, e-library, webcasting, audio and video on demand, video conferencing and satellite broadcasting.

In addition to the multimedia approach, face-to-face instructions are also provided through tutorial sessions organized at provincial study centres throughout the country and also through "professional experience activities" held at the STOU campus in the final semester before graduation.

BACKGROUND: OPEN UNIVERSITY MALAYSIA, OUM

Open University Malaysia (OUM) was set up 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. Its cumulative intake at the end of the May 2009 semester was 86,850, a huge increase from its humble inaugural intake of 753 learners in August 2001. Its enrolment stands at 64,721 of which 95.5% are undergraduates and 4.5% are post-graduates. More than half 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 95% of the learners are working adults. Most of them are married and about 60% are females. A large majority (73%) are in the 21–40 age range while 25% are in the 20–30 age range. At its sixth convocation in August last year, the number of graduates totalled 13,366 and in the forthcoming seventh convocation, 8,000 learners are expected to graduate.

OUM's role is to democratize education, that is, to provide education to the masses, particularly working adults who aspire to improve their academic qualifications in order to secure better careers and quality of life. It also provides education to learners in the remotest part of the country, senior citizens, the underprivileged, the physically disadvantaged and prison inmates. Its main challenge lies in managing the tremendous increase in learner numbers from one academic year to another and meeting the needs of diverse learners, who 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 bachelor's degree, while for masters and PhD, they can take up to a maximum of four and eight years respectively. OUM provides its learners a quality learning environment through its blended learning pedagogy. This encompasses self-study by learners using specially constructed learning modules, face-to-face tutorials with tutors and virtual interaction that is made available 24 hours daily through the learning management system, myLMS. These are supplemented with learning materials in various formats, such as CD-ROM and audio/video and web-based materials.

ATTRITION RATES

In STOU, the learner *drop-out rate* is about 50 to 60 percent, giving an overall retention rate of 40 to 50 percent (Sumalee, 2008). Like that of other ODL universities, the drop-out rate of STOU is found to be highest among learners in the first and second years. Out of 772,904 new learners enrolled in a bachelor degree programme from 1994 to 2001, 476,063 (62%) dropped out within two years of enrolment (Pratya Vesarach, 2006). A number of factors were identified as the causes. Research on student retention (Sumalee S., 2008; Thanavibulchai, N., 1989 and Prommapun, B., 1995) indicated that the main reasons behind learners' decision to leave the university were varied. These included: (i) time management; (ii) lack of understanding of the concept of ODL; (iii) difficulty in adjusting to the new learning culture and environment; (iv) not used to being

independent; (v) lack of discipline and commitment; and (vi) isolation due to geographical distance.

At OUM, the *cumulative attrition rate*, which is the proportion of total active learners taking services since August 2001 over the total enrolment to date , that is May 2009 (over a span of 8 years) is 42.3%. However, the *semester-to-semester attrition rate*, which measures the proportion of learners who were active in the previous semester and re-register for the current semester is monitored very closely. This is a more meaningful indicator in terms of guiding the institution in devising relevant and more focused interventions to mitigate the problem. For example, the semester-to-semester attrition rate from January to May 2009 was 12.5%.

Telephone interviews with non-registered learners and focus group interviews with "at risk" learners in OUM revealed their main challenges. These are shown in Figure 1 below:
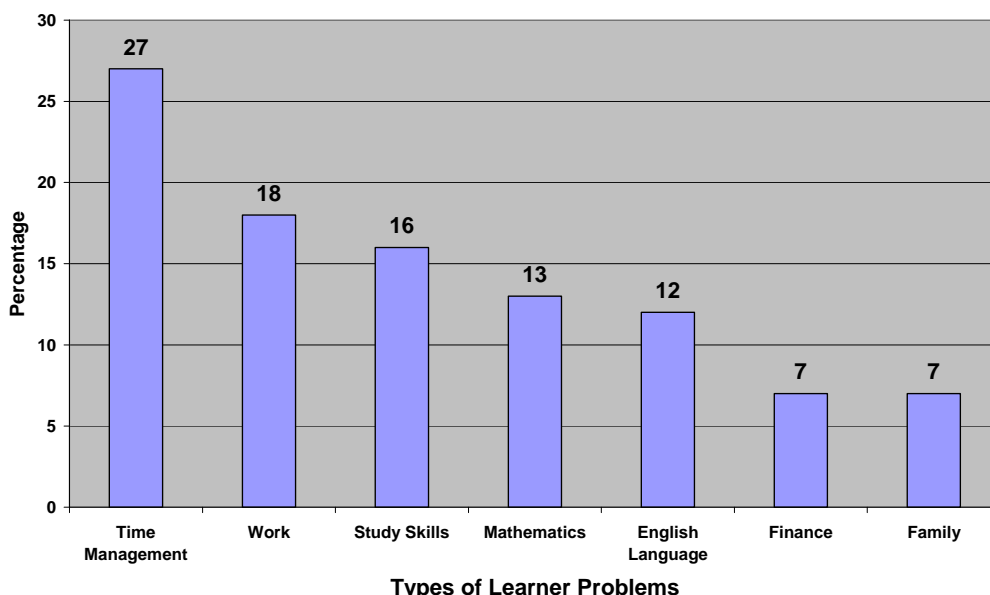

Figure 1: Types of Learner Problems at Open University Malaysia

As can be seen, 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, as adults, they also have to grapple with family and financial problems (Latifah A.L. et al. 2006).

RETENTION INITIATIVES

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

dispositional, institutional and epistemological. 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 advice, counselling and specific study skills to help learners cope with their challenges.

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

(1)   Classifying learners according to characteristics that identify those who are most vulnerable to drop out (i.e. new, "at-risk" and non-registered learners);

(2)   Identifying the features of courses that contribute to high or low drop-out rates ("at risk" courses)

(3)   Conducting surveys and interviews on drop-outs; and

(4)   Obtaining feedback from existing learners.

New Learners

As mentioned above, new learners are most vulnerable to drop out. This is a common phenomenon in most ODL institutions and a major reason 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, known as "learning skills workshop," is conducted for all new learners at all learning centres throughout the country, before the first tutorial begins. The workshop was found to have a positive impact on the performance of learners, examination sitting rate and re-registration rates (Latifah, 2007). Orientation materials are subsequently made available on its website for those who could not make it to the workshop. STOU conducts a similar programme for new learners at the beginning of the first semester in every province in the country. In this programme, new learners are introduced to the concept of ODL and what it takes to be a successful ODL learner. STOU also provides a VCD containing the orientation materials for all new learners.

"At risk" learners

Besides new learners, both OUM and STOU also give special attention to "at risk" learners. These are learners with a cumulative grade-point average (CGPA) of less than 2.0, which is the passing grade. Besides the normal face-to-face academic counselling, both institutions have leveraged on information and communication technology (ICT) by providing e-counselling to this group of learners. Academic counsellors at both institutions also conduct phone counselling and e-counselling to these "at risk" learners who, for personal and other reasons, hesitate to engage in face-to-face counselling.

Apart from the above, "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 two semesters are communicated to them. Similarly, in STOU, letters are sent to learners with the same purpose.

STOU has been capitalizing on the use of radio and television programmes to provide information and advice on how to be successful in distance learning to learners while OUM embarked on the use of Internet radio to reach out to all learners.

There are two different forms of counselling activities in STOU: *appointment guidance activity* and *learning skills workshop*. Studies conducted at the university found that more than 80% of learners who use these services were satisfied and felt the two counselling activities helped to improve their motivation and confidence (Sumalee, 2008). Similarly, in OUM, counselling "at risk" learners was found to be effective. This was proved by the high percentage of improvement in performance and high percentage of increase in persistence rates among those who attended the counselling session compared to those who did not (Latifah *et al.*, 2006).

"Non-active" learners

The phenomenon of senior learners not re-registering in the subsequent semester (non-active learners) is common in STOU and OUM. In both institutions, a telephone interview was conducted with non-active learners to understand their problems and provide assistance to ease them back into the system. STOU calls this a following-up or contact centre programme. It is currently being piloted with learners in a few provinces that are close to Bangkok. In OUM, the success rate of this intervention, measured by the number of learners who re-registered after the call was made compared to the number actually contacted, was found to be quite low (from 8% to 10%).

Examination clinics

To further assist learners in improving their academic performance, OUM conducts examination clinics for "high risk" courses. These are courses with a usually high (more than 30%) failure rate. These sessions are facilitated by academic staff and just like in any other intervention, learners' attendance is recorded and their results in the particular course monitored. At STOU, for courses in which the failure rates are high, different forms of tutoring are provided. These 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 these whenever they are free. Tutoring on demand and intensive tutoring are organized when there is demand from learners. The follow-up study in this activity found that over 80 percent of learners who attended intensive tutoring passed their examinations.

Dialogues

Feedback from learners and tutors is crucial for an institution to evaluate its performance. In both institutions, regular dialogue sessions are held between the management and staff of the universities with learners and tutors on site, that is, at the learning centres. Both universities found the dialogues helpful in making learners feel cared for and guided in their studies. The learners appeared happy and attached to the university.

Surveys

Another method of obtaining direct feedback from learners is through a survey. STOU has conducted numerous surveys, both on existing learners and drop-outs. The outcomes of the surveys have provided invaluable input on the factors that cause learners to drop out. The rationale for the various retention initiatives undertaken by both universities have been based on the findings of these surveys. OUM conducts an Importance-Satisfaction survey annually with the objective of identifying areas of strengths and weaknesses, measuring learner satisfaction levels in their learning experiences and monitoring the changes in the satisfaction levels over a period of time. In addition, surveys are also conducted to gauge learners' use of ICT, effectiveness of collaborative online learning, face-to-face tutoring, counselling and many others.

Institutional Data Analysis

Analysis of institutional data can provide a variety of useful and relevant information pertaining to attrition, and this is one area that both institutions have embarked on. Various types of institutional data were collated and analysed to gain invaluable information on learner background, examination attendance, coursework submission, course re-registration, etc. This initiative has the advantage of not requiring massive conduct of surveys which requires a large amount of resources, money and time. At STOU, data related to student drop-outs such as the list of names of first-year learners who dropped out and their academic backgrounds were analysed. In addition, data on the number of learners sitting for examination in each subject and percentage of those who did not pass are also collected. The analyses of these data were then used as a basis to design activities to support them and keep them in the system. At OUM, one of the most recent efforts in this area involved looking into learners' examination attendance, their coursework and re-registration status. A model was developed that showed interdependence between coursework completion, examination attendance and re-registration status. Based on this finding, specific retention initiatives were undertaken to improve re-registration rates of learners.

"Institutional" Interventions

The aforementioned initiatives carried out by OUM and STOU address mainly learner-attributed factors. However, a lot of effort has also been expended by both institutions on addressing institutional-related factors as well. For example, a one-stop learner services centre has been set up in the institutions. This centre tends to learners' enquiries and problems and acts as a focal point where they could obtain information as well as advice and assistance in resolving issues. In order to track and monitor learners' enquiries effectively, OUM recently developed its own electronic customer relationship management system (E-CRM). A similar system had been fully implemented by STOU much earlier.

Both universities have been continuously focusing on the following in order to further minimize the attrition rates among learners: module improvement, more effective tutor training, improving teaching and learning and its facilities, upgrading physical and ICT infrastructure, and reviewing assessment in terms of load and balance to suit adult learners and many others. A considerable amount of resources and time have been spent on improving services and processes in the areas mentioned above to ensure that they meet learners' expectations.

ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

Despite much interest and research, 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, etc.) barriers proved to be the primary causes of attrition for which there is very little that an institution can do.

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. This means a certain intervention can only be effective to a certain extent. Whatever the institution does beyond that may not lead to improved learner retention. This probably explains the common phenomenon of the relatively higher attrition rate among first semester or first year learners, whereby a significant proportion of them may just want to explore whether ODL is the right choice for their education.

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.

One of the major causes of attrition in an ODL institution is learners' feelings of loneliness and isolation which can be addressed to a certain extent by keeping them in constant touch with their peers and tutors. In this context, ICT has been extensively used by STOU and OUM to maximise interaction among the learner community through their respective e-learning platforms or learning management systems (LMS). This would motivate learners to continue their studies, thus minimizing the likelihood of dropping out. However, in many cases, the problem of digital divide has hindered the effectiveness of ICT in fulfilling this role.

Another aspect in which OUM and STOU differ is in the medium of instruction. In STOU, the Thai language, which is the people's mother tongue, is widely used while OUM has moved from the predominant Malay language to English in programme delivery and modules. As noted in the findings above, English presents one of the challenges faced by OUM's learners.

Even though the challenges faced by learners in the two ODL institutions are somewhat similar, the institutions' challenges may differ, and one example concerns learner diversity. The student population of STOU is many times larger than that of OUM; they are more dispersed throughout Thailand and quite a large number are from rural areas. In this regard, STOU has been very successful in catering to the needs of its more diverse learners. As a government-funded institution, it enjoys many facilities at a relatively cheap and affordable cost. This is evidenced by the widespread use of radio and television as well as video-conferencing in reaching out to its learners even in the remotest regions of Thailand. In contrast, as a private institution, OUM has to fork out much more for the use of such facilities to cater to learners in remote areas.

CONCLUSION

The primary role of ODL institutions is to democratize education, that is, to provide education to the masses. This role will not be fully realized if the attrition rates at these institutions are high. One approach in trying to minimize the attrition rates is to learn from the best practices of other institutions in addressing this issue. Both institutions have initiated many retention programmes that have contributed towards the minimizing of drop-out rates. A list of various interventions carried out by OUM (Latifah & Mansor, 2007) shows the extent of efforts made. This information provides ample opportunity for both institutions to embark on future collaborative retention efforts to better address this critical institutional issue.

To begin with, the management of STOU and OUM recently approved a joint retention research project to be undertaken by the academic staff of both universities. Examples of possible areas of research include the use of artificial intelligence 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 readily available institutional data. Another area of collaborative research is in the use of mobile technology in learning or m-learning. As the use of mobile phones in both Thailand and Malaysia is prevalent, mobile technology presents a great potential in addressing attrition and should form an integral part of retention programmes at both institutions. Another viable area of collaborative research would be in developing a range of multimedia and e-learning materials. Both institutions could also embark on an Impact / Graduate Tracer Study, which would serve as a very rich source of information, particularly on the impact of the institutions' curricula and services on learners.

Finally, on a more universal note, educators in ODL institutions should work together and focus their efforts on meeting the needs of their learners and not on what is currently available and convenient to deliver from the institutions' point of view. The provision of excellent support and genuine concern for learners should underpin all collaborative retention efforts.

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