# Supporting New ODL Learners via Face-to-Face Academic Advising to Increase Retention: Sharing Open University Malaysia's Experience

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## Abstract

*The last decade has witnessed an increased demand for tertiary education via Open and Distance Learning due to advance methods in technology for educators, administrators and learners that make a difference in effective instruction being delivered at a distance. More people too are beginning to embrace adult education and lifelong learning. Institutions that offer such mode of learning which include the Indira Gandhi National Open University, Islamic Azad University, Anadolu University and Allama Iqbal Open University, have all attained the 'Mega' university status with enrolment exceeding 1,000,000 learners. Attrition rate which can be based on completion or graduation rates of their learners is as low as 50 percent to as high as 80 percent. A high rate of attrition is always linked to the learners' background, which includes their academic and social background, workplace settings, their ability to adapt to the new learning environment as well as their ability to finance their studies. As the cost of attracting learners to an ODL institution is higher than the cost of retaining them, thus the subject of retention has become a widely researched subject until today. At Open University Malaysia, the retention rate is within 69-79 percent among new learners and varies from one faculty to another and also varies for learners from different intakes. Data collected over the last five years revealed that attrition is highest for learners in their first semester as compared to later stages. Thus, several interventions were taken to reach out to new learners to provide support services to engage them actively in learning. Research conducted on 6,141 learners from all over Malaysia throughout a one-year period in 2011 found that early interventions that include face-to-face meetings cum Academic Advising sessions conducted by Directors of Learning Centers, have successfully increased the retention rate of first semester learners to 80.1 percent in January 2012. This study is important as early intervention and engagement with new learners will help to improve retention rate and enable an ODL institution to remain sustainable.*

**Keywords:** *Attrition, Retention, Interventions, Engagement, Interaction, Academic Advising*

# 1.0 Introduction

Advancement in technology and a high demand for tertiary education among working adults over the last decade have resulted in the setting up of many Open and Distance Learning (ODL) institutions. Some of these institutions have even achieved mega status with enrolment exceeding 1,000,000 students. These include the Indira Gandhi National Open University, Islamic Azad University, Anadolu University and Allama Iqbal Open University. However, attrition is a major issue among ODL institutions as it is common knowledge that their attrition is higher than conventional universities. A review of literature would clearly conclude that attrition is a multidimensional concept, encompassing a cluster of variables influenced by the learners' characteristics and family life circumstances, workload, geographical limitations as well as institutional support services. Lack of motivation, lack of self confidence, a general tendency towards non-affiliation towards the ODL providers are all included as possible cause towards dropping out of the enrolled programme in their first year.

Thus, it is not a surprise that attrition is one of the widely researched topics since 1970 triggered by the work of Spady (1971) and then made popular by Tinto (1975). The contentious issue in the study of attrition is how attrition and retention is measured as they are defined differently by different institutions. Most of the attrition rates reported by researches are based on the average number of students quitting or dropping out of their programmes before their completion. This is usually the method used in conventional universities. Others measure retention based on completion or graduation rates. Suggestions have also been given to measure retention rate of ODL learners who are well into semester 3 onwards and not of freshies who may still be unsure of their decision to stay on or drop out after the first semester.

This paper investigates the impact of a new intervention taken by Open University Malaysia (OUM) to increase the retention rate of new learners.

# 2.0 Literature Review

Attrition is a complex phenomenon that happens in most institutions of higher learning and the reasons are many. According to Carr (2000), ODL institutions in general have higher attrition rates compared to traditional institutions which he estimated to be between 50 to 80 percent compared to about 40 percent among traditional institutions. One reason commonly cited is the feeling of isolation among open and distance learners (Palloff & Pratt, 1999; Reisman, 2003; and Rovai et al., 2007).

Tinto's (1993) and Bean and Metzner's (1985) 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 drop out. They suggested that insufficient interactions of students with peers and faculty and differences with the prevailing value patterns of other students are also likely to result in dropouts.

Moxley et al. (2001) argue that retention is more than completing course. They suggested that students must be supported to successfully meet their study goals and this requires strong student communities, which are often cemented during the orientation process. According to Latifah, Bahroom, and Sungsri (2009), attrition rate is highest in the early part of the learners' study.

Raghavan (2011) stated that early and frequent contact with students is critical to address retention. Regular meetings must be initiated to encourage spontaneous interactions among students and administration that may build positive relationships and the foundation for learning communities.

## 3.0 Retention at OUM from 2006 to 2010

Figure 1 below shows the retention rate of new learners in OUM from 2006 to 2010. It is noted that the retention rate in 2006 was 74.7 percent and then decreased to 69.1 percent in 2008 before increasing to 79.8 percent in 2010. The fluctuating figures were of much concern to OUM because, as an ODL and private institution, it is important to ensure a steady increase in learners' rate of retention so as to maintain sustainability.



| Year | Retention Rate |
|------|----------------|
| 2006 | 74.7 |
| 2007 | 74.7 |
| 2008 | 69.1 |
| 2009 | 75.7 |
| 2010 | 78.9 |
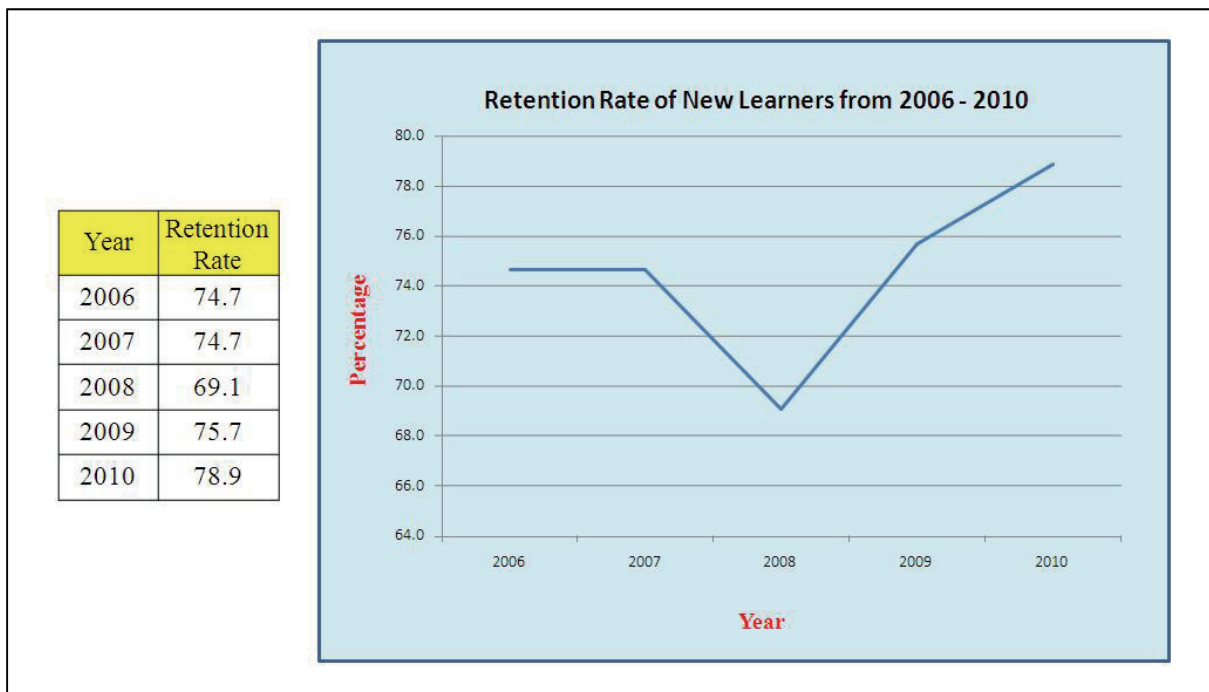
**Figure 1:** Retention Rate of New Learners at Open University Malaysia from 2006 to 2010

## 4.0 Interventions carried out by OUM to increase student retention

Various interventions have been taken by OUM to improve retention rates since 2001 (Latif & Fadzil (2007). According to Raghavan (2010), OUM has set up the Center for Student Management to work hand-in-hand with Directors of Regional Learning Centers to carry out interventions efforts to address attrition issues affecting all categories of learners; first semester freshies, "at-risk", dormant and other learners. These include conducting workshops on Learning Skills, Assignment Preparation and Examination Preparation.

Some of the impacts of the above interventions were investigated and presented. Ng and Wagner (2007) in their research on OUM students found that the participation of learners increased to 84 percent from 64 percent (Kaur, 2004) with the introduction of Collaborative Online Learning (COL). The learner's average hit rate is generally higher for COL courses compared to non-COL courses (Ng, 2008). Abas and Fadzil (2009) in their research on the use of MyVLE for online discussion found that well trained and effective tutors were observed to have succeeded in creating a warm social environment where learners were also found to be more active in posting their messages.

Research conducted by Latif, Bahroom and Mohamad (2007) on Academic Counseling via face-to-face counseling sessions for "at risk" learners of OUM in 2005 showed that there was an improvement in their Cumulative Grade Point Average (CGPA) and re-registration. Ng et al. (2008) conducted research on the impact of Learning Skills workshops as part of the orientation programme found that the workshops were effective in enhancing learning readiness among new learners and increased their satisfaction level.

In his research involving the use of MyVLE and other communication tools to create an online community among learners, Ng (2010) found that the interaction level of learner-learner, learner-tutor, learner-staff and learner-content was high resulting in higher engagement rate. The research also found that higher level of engagement had positive impact on learners' sense of community, satisfaction, intrinsic motivation and their perceived commitment to stay in their programmes.

Beginning semester September 2010, in a proactive attempt to increase new learners' retention rate to be above 80 percent, OUM has embarked on an intervention programme called 'Face-to-Face Academic Advising for New Learners'. This programme enlists the effort from Directors of Learning Centres to meet new learners to provide adult learners with comprehensive advising and guide them towards excellence in academic, personal, social and career development. The idea behind this intervention was to contribute to the new learners' development and improving their experiences in ODL environment by providing preventive and remedial solutions with the aim to increase their retention rate. The challenges the learners faced were: time management, inability to complete assignments, low proficiency in English Language, stress, and financial constraints. These input were collected, analysed and reported to the Centre for Student Management as service user feedback.

## 5.0 Research Methodology

The objective of this research is to investigate the impact of Academic Advising carried out on new learners to increase their retention rate. The conceptual model used is an extension of the E-Customers Retention Model proposed by Ng (2010) with emphasis on Academic Advising conducted by Directors of Learning Centers (see Figure 2).

The research was carried out in two parts. Part One involved 6,141 new learners from 18 learning centers throughout Malaysia who registered and started their studies during the January, May and September 2011 semesters.
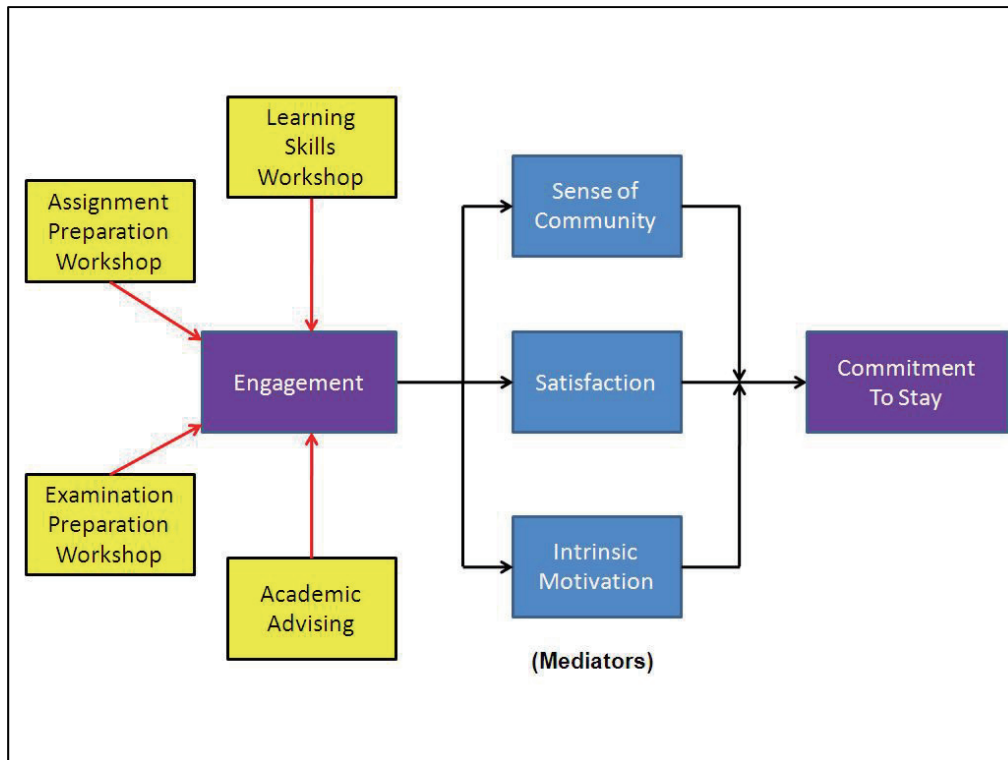
**Figure 2:** Conceptual Model of the Research

Part Two involved new learners from the May 2011 semester only, selected from five learning centers. Stratified random sampling was used in the selection of these learning centres based on the different regions in Malaysia. Learners who received the face-to-face academic advising session in May 2011 with their respective Directors of Learning Center were tracked to see if they re-registered for their September 2011 semester.

## 6.0 Results

Table 1 shows the number of new learners enrolled in each semester in 2011 and the percentage who have attended the Academic Advising conducted by Directors of Learning Centre on new learners as well as the number of new learners who re-registered the following semester.

**Table 1**: Tracking Re-registration of New Learners in 2011

| No | Semester | No. of new learners enrolled in current semester | No. of new learners who attended the Academic Advising in the current semester | % Attendance | No. of learners who re-registered in the following semester | % of learners who re-registered in the following semester (Retention Rate) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | January 2011 | 2522 | 1611 | 63.9 | 1868 | 74.1 |
| 2 | May 2011 | 1832 | 1365 | 74.5 | 1386 | 75.7 |
| 3 | September 2011 | 1787 | 1583 | 88.6 | 1432 | 80.1 |

Figure 3 shows the retention rate of new learners in 2011 who re-registered for the following semester. Note that the intervention has resulted in the increase in the learner's re-registration rate in the following semester.
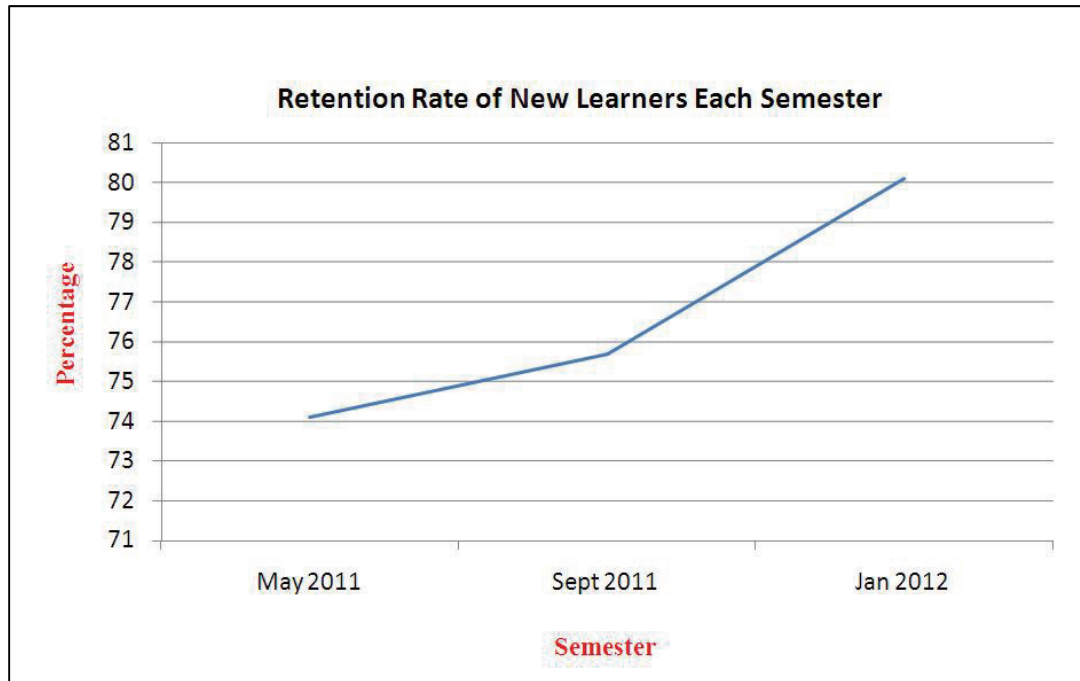


**Figure 3**: Retention rate of new learners for May 2011 to Jan 2012

Table 2 shows the result of an in-depth study done by investigating the interventions carried out at the five selected learning centers during the May 2011 semester. The data shown are of learners whose individual names were matched against the re-registration data. It was necessary to track only new learners who received the face-to-face Academic Advising in May 2011 who were the actual learners who returned in the September 2011 semester for re-registration.

**Table 2:** Tracking Re-registration Rate of New Learners at Five Selected Learning Centres in 2011

| No | Learning Centre | No. of new learners who attended the Academic Counseling in May 2011 Semester | No. of new learners re-registered in Semester September 2011 | % Re-registered (Retention Rate) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Shah Alam | 104 | 91 | 87.5 |
| 2 | Pahang | 52 | 45 | 86.5 |
| 3 | Sarawak | 52 | 44 | 84.6 |
| 4 | Johor Bahru | 94 | 76 | 80.9 |
| 5 | Penang | 73 | 53 | 72.6 |
| | Total | 375 | 309 | 82.4 |

It was found that the intervention has had a positive impact on re-registration. Overall, of the 375 learners who attended the Academic Counseling, 309 or 82.4 percent re-registered the following semester.

## 7.0 Conclusion

The study has successfully proven that this new intervention carried out on new learners in 2011 has had a positive impact on their re-registration rate in semester January 2012 where the retention was 80.1 percent. Before the intervention, the retention rate was below 80 percent.

Tracking individual new learners at the five selected Learning Centres and matching their names with their re-registration the following semester also found that there was a positive impact where the retention was successfully increased to 82.4 percent.

This study is important as early interventions could help engage the learners. It is pertinent for ODL institutions to offer opportunities for its learners to connect with the institution as early as possible which then helps to develop a high level of sense of community, satisfaction and intrinsic motivation. This valuable experience has successfully impacted on their commitment to stay in their programmes as suggested by Ng (2010).

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