

FACTORS INFLUENCING ATTRITION AMONG LEARNERS: FACULTY OF APPLIED SOCIAL SCIENCES IN OUM

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Abstract

This study examined factors affecting the attrition rate among learners in Open and Distance Learning (ODL) institution. The main focus of the study is to explore what factors cause the attrition, and what are the best ways or strategies to prevent the attrition rate among adult learners. There were 15 adult learners from the Faculty of Applied and Social Sciences (FASS) at Open University Malaysia (OUM) were taken from the population of dormant learners which were not registered for three concurrent semesters. The study found that the main factor of attrition was learners were over-extended with too many responsibilities. The three ways to prevent attrition among learners were learners' communication, learners' mentoring, and learners' awareness. It is recommended that the best practice for prevention learners' attrition was learner itself. This study offered two benefits, factors affecting the attrition rate among adult learners and offered some ways in preventing attrition among adult learners from learners' own perspective. Therefore, this study can be used as a benchmark for the faculty to handle the attrition cases for adult learners in open and distance learning institutions.

Keywords: *Attrition; adult learner, open and distance learning*

Introduction

Adult learners are typically defined as learners over the age of 25 with a wide range of abilities, educational and cultural backgrounds, responsibilities and job experiences, and are often referred to as non-traditional learners (Roach, 2002). Adult learning has been viewed as a process of being freed from the oppression of being illiterate, a means of gaining knowledge and skills, a way to satisfy learner needs, and a process of critical self-reflection that can lead to transformation (Cranton, 1994). Open and distance learning provides the opportunity for adult learners to increase competence to achieve their full potential in life and be able to apply whatever knowledge and skill they gain today to living more effectively tomorrow. Open and Distance Learning (ODL) refers to learning approaches that focus on freeing learners from constraints of time and place while offering flexible learning opportunities. For many learners, open and distance learning is a way of combining work and family responsibilities with educational opportunities (United Nations Educational (UNESCO) (2003). The openness of distance learning is also seen in relatively flexible organisational structures, delivery and communication patterns as well as the use of various technologies to support ODL. It is delivered using a variety of electronic systems either through synchronous communication (learning in which all parties participate at the same time) or through asynchronous communication (learning in which parties participate at different times). The main systems are mediated by correspondence, audiovisual means (television and radio), multimedia (audio and text files), and the Internet (UNESCO, 2003).

The Internet has provided universities opportunities to offer greater access and presents increased access to a broader spectrum of adult learners. Larger populations of adult learners will obtain access to higher learning over the internet because of less time available to busy working parents who want to get a college degree (Rosenberg, 2001; Carnevale, 2005). The online format forces the learners to begin the learning process instead of sitting in a face to face classroom and waiting for the content to be delivered in writing or through lecture and discussion (Wojceichowski & Palmer, 2005). Adult learners see online programs providing new opportunities and preventing a short or even long distance commutes to attend a class because they can remain in their homes or workplaces and they can participate in learning activities, interact with most of the people in class, and exchange information each other (Maguire, 2005).

Whatever the learning formats or distribution methods, the problem of attrition have always been an issue. Attrition is the dropout rate or non-compliance rate in which learners who had enrolled in a course but do not fulfill all the course requirements nor complete the course. Distance education learners have a higher attrition rate than conventional learners, (Thompson, 1998; Phipps & Merisotis, 1999), although there has been much debate over the cause and how the attrition rates are calculated. One of the challenges in adult online learning is to meet the needs of the learners while increasing enrollments. Although distance education is more adaptable to the needs of adult learners, the challenge is to overcome the barrier to retain these learners. An adult who sets an educational goal to complete a degree in a three to five years in ODL discovers this can be a challenge vulnerable to assault by life's activities and stresses (Bocchi, Eastman, & Swift, 2004; Carr, 2000; Roach, 2002; Murray, 2001). However, if retention rates improve for an institution, then its reputation will also improve. Improvement of retention will keep the growth rate increasing in the future and this will allow each institution of ODL institutions to compete with other virtual universities.

Levitz (2000) interviewed four online universities that take a proactive approach and have learned from experience that by the time at-risk learners are overwhelmed by academic difficulties, it is often too late to help them. Cyr (1997) promoted the concept of learner choice in the hands of the consumers and online colleges being staffed by highly-trained learner-oriented professionals. Thus, it is important to have a plan of action for better retention and to focus on learner is a prudent strategy for all online universities. Basically, in the field of distance education, learners are the focus and their satisfaction is a key element. According to Palloff & Pratt (2003), educators need to be much more deliberate in paying attention to learners and what they need because educators not physically seeing or interacting with learners on a daily basis. Learners are also the focus because they are one of the major sources of income for the private learning institutions. However, if learners are not retained at an acceptable rate, the lost tuition fees can have a large impact on institutions (Simpson, 2004). Numerous studies have been conducted regarding attrition rates and factors for attrition in distance education with the majority of studies were conducted with data from higher education programmes. Therefore, the majority of the researches cited in this study were based on distance education courses conducted within higher education settings. This study sought to identify factors that may have affected online learner attrition and the effective ways how to prevent attrition among them.

Statement of the Problem

The ability to retain adult online learners has been challenge for many open and distance institutions especially those are practice online teaching (Arsham, 2004). Many of adult online learners drop out before they finish their first course (Bocchi, et al., 2004; Simpson, 2004; Zhang, 1999). If distance education can achieve less attrition, then more adults can get a degree and become adults with higher self-esteem and with better qualifications for the workforce (Wheeler, Miller, Fernandez, Half, Gibson, & Myer, 1999). Thus, ODL institutions must prioritise learner's needs and be aware of learner's attitudes about his or her greatest or least satisfaction regarding various aspects of online and blended mode of learning (Palloff & Pratt, 1999). Most importantly, it needs to provide solutions to the obstacles that blocking the learners' success. When online universities understand how to assist learners in their development as online learners, early intervention to prevent dropouts will become commonplace (Levitz, 2000). Therefore, this study interested to identify factors affecting the attrition rate among online adult learners.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to identify the possible factors affecting online adult learners for not being retained. This increased understanding of the factors surrounding learners dropping out will aid ODL institutions in intervening to prevent attrition. Therefore, the study can provides direction for counsellors, educators and administrators to identify obstacles that influencing attrition, thus, the faculty can have better understanding about attrition rate among adult learners and then formulate interventions and improve retention among adult learners.

Research Questions

This study sought to identify factors that may have affected learners' attrition. The specific research questions were used to describe and identify factors contributing to attrition. These questions attempted to increase understanding of adult learners' attitudes towards their online education.

1. What factors have been shown to lead to the withdrawal of adult learners in open and distance learning?
2. What are the best ways that learners can retain themselves in open and distance learning?

Significance of the Study

This study was important because it focused on the adult working learner. It continues to be imperative to seek information about their satisfaction throughout the open and distance educational experience. Adult learners are partly at risk due to all the adult responsibilities in their lives. The improved support of adult learners by institutions can improve retention rates. Additionally, it is critical to comprehend the needs and vulnerabilities of the adult learners. High rates of attrition are seen as a measure of the lack of quality of the education offered by ODL institutions (Thompson, 1999). According to Simpson (2004), proactive intervention before an adult learner drops out will assist these open and distance programmes to grow to meet the needs of lifelong adult learners around globe. The institutions for adult learners that address their needs will earn a good reputation. As long as ODL higher education has learners who withdraw and dropout, there will continue to be a need to study why this is occurring.

Literature Review

Open and distance learning is flexible in which learners of any age can adapt the learning process. More learners have access to distance education that previously could not attend due to time or geographic distance barriers. The Internet presents increased access to a broader spectrum of adult learners. Larger populations of adult learners will obtain access to higher learning over the Internet because of less time available to busy working parents who want to get a college degree (Rosenberg, 2001; Cyr, 1997; & Carnevale, 2005). However, for many adult working learners in ODL institution, time is emerging as a critical factor in learning (Rosenberg, 2001). That is why open and distance education learners are recognised to have a higher attrition rate than conventional universities learners (Thompson, 1997; Phipps & Merisotis, 1999). A study conducted by Breslin (2000) in Illinois found that in the Illinois Virtual Campus (IVC) network, some community colleges are reporting attrition rates greater than 20% when compared to the traditional classroom attrition rates at Elgin Community College, 64% of the learners completed their distance education courses, compared to 83% who completed traditional classroom courses and in Moraine Community College reported that for some distance education courses, the attrition rate among learners reached up to 70%. There are four categories of factors have emerged to explain and predict attrition in distance education (Garland, 1993 & Gibson, 1998), (i) student situation: events that arise from life circumstances such as changes in family and employer support, employment or financial status, educational status, health, and academic self-concept; (ii) student disposition: personal characteristics including learning style, motivation, and perception-of-obligation as well as other demographic variables such as academic preparation, GPA, ethnicity, gender, Web and e-mail competency, family size, number of dependents, and socio-economic status; (iii) institutional system: factors relating to the quality of the course such as the instructor's planning, preparation and delivery, and the quality of student support provided by the instructor, other faculty, staff, administrators, and the institution, for examples would include class and Web design, class size, term length, technical support, and student-services support; (iv) course content: the difficulty, or perceived difficulty, of the subject matter.

The lack of adequate training for faculty and learners can also feel like a lack of support from the institution. In addition, electronic pedagogy is that faculty must be trained not only to use technology but also to shift the ways in which they organise and deliver material (Palloff & Pratt, 2001). Those adult online learners who enroll without a large amount of computer experience are at significant risk of dropping out (Carr, 2000). In a study of the high dropout rate at a small private university, Lynch (2001) discovered a domino effect when learners lack computer skills and have technical challenges, then feel isolated or disconnected, the resulting avalanche of

feelings of inadequacy may cause them to dropout. Lynch (2001) then compared what occurred when learners took an orientation course to get familiar with technology. The findings reported two main outcomes; (i) it was reported that there were 89% improvement in technology skills. Part of the orientation course was for learners to compare face to face with distance education to assist new learners with understanding distance education and how it differs, (ii) it was reported that 15% reduced rate of attrition after adult learners took an orientation course at the beginning of the distance learning experience.

These researches suggest that higher attrition rates for distance education are common due to online learning mode, but the majority of researchers do not provide conclusive reasons for the attrition rates. In general, there is a lack of validated variables or frameworks to measure attrition within distance education institutions (Thompson, 1998 & Parker, 1999). Therefore, this study sought to identify factors that may have affected learners' attrition and what strategies have open and distance institutions utilised to prevent attrition from learners' perspective.

Methodology

Participants

There were 15 learners from different programmes under the Faculty of Applied Social Sciences (FASS) in Open University Malaysia (OUM) involved in the study. These random samples were taken from population of dormant learners from Sabah and Sarawak which were not registered for three concurrent semesters. Personal data of dormant learners were provided by administrator from Admission and Record Department, OUM.

Instrument

The instrument employed for this research study was a brief survey via phone interviews that contained a set of questionnaires for selected faculty of online courses at Open University Malaysia. This set of questionnaires divided into two segments. The first segment examined factors that influence attrition rates of adult online learners and the second segment investigated the effective ways how to prevent attrition among these learners. These nine short questions answered from the unique perspective of the learners were adjusted from Funk (2007).

Procedures

After identified the dormant learners from different programmes under the Faculty of Applied Social Sciences (FASS) in Open University Malaysia (OUM), researcher has been interviewed participants via phone in a simple brief of 10 minutes call. These included 15 undergraduate learners enrolled in distance learning (combination of online and face-to-face tutorials). For the first segment, they were asked to rank each factor from highly unlikely to cause them to dropout to highly likely to cause them to dropout from the list of ten choices. For the second segment, learners were asked to declare anonymously, as a learner what are the strategies or ways to prevent them from dropout. The total list of seventeen ways pertaining to things learners could have done to prevent attrition were further analysed and categorised by researcher into three subgroups, learners' communication, learners' mentoring and learners' awareness. The confidential information of all participants was conscientiously preserved.

Results and Discussion

The results of the study are presented in two parts: (a) a description of factors affecting the attrition as rated by learners; (b) a description of the effective ways how to prevent attrition as rated by learners.

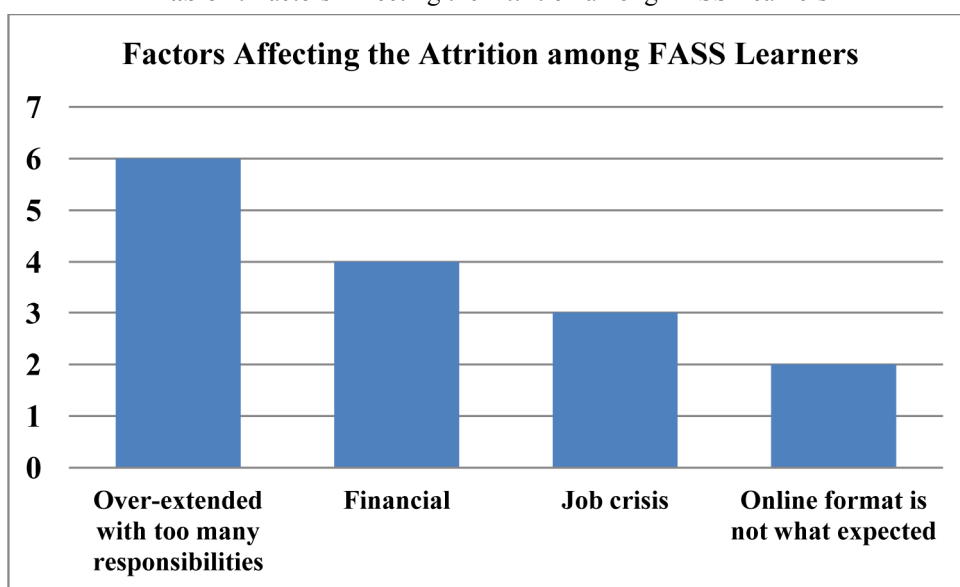
(a) Factors Affecting the Attrition among FASS Learners

The four factors affecting the attrition among 15 learners from FASS were found to be:

- (i) Over-extended with too many responsibilities = 6 learners.
- (ii) Financial = 4 learners.
- (iii) Job crisis = 3 learners.
- (iv) Online format is not what as they expected = 2 learners.

Table 1 shows the four factors affecting the attrition among FASS learners. It has been found that, the highest factor was learners were over-extended with too many responsibilities with the percentage of 54.5%. The second highest was learners have the financial problems with the percentage of 36.3%. The job crisis and the online format is not what as learners expected were also considered at the factors affecting the attrition with the percentage of 27.2% and 18.1% of each factor.

Table 1: Factors Affecting the Attrition among FASS Learners



(b) The Effective Ways How to Prevent Attrition

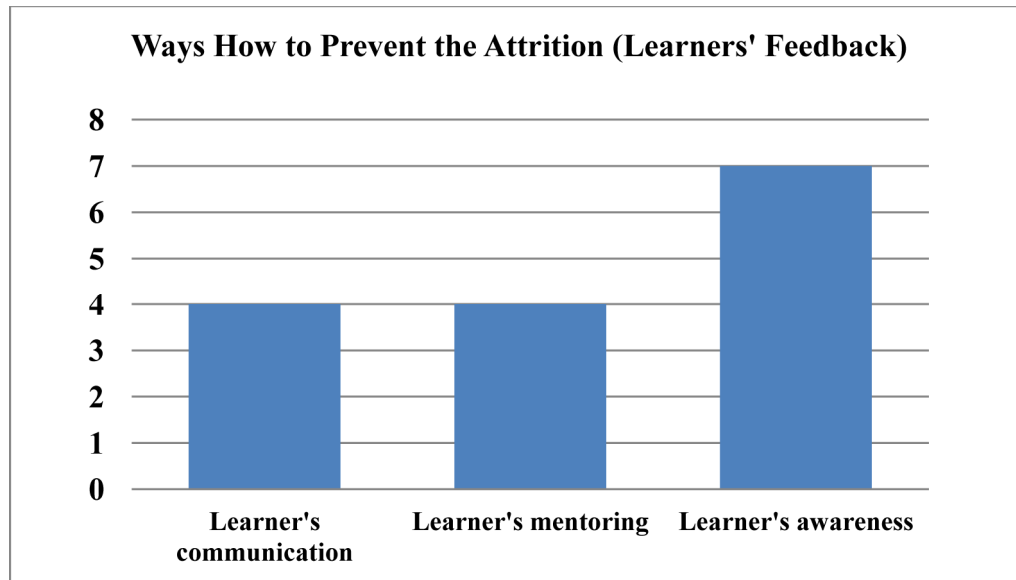
There were seventeen ways of how to prevent attrition was sub-grouped into the three categories; (i) learners’ communication, (ii) learners’ mentoring, and learners’ awareness in descending order of highly likely to prevent learners from dropout. Below are the examples of responses from learners in each category:

- (i) Learners’ communication – learner has to interact more and communicate better with institutions, faculty, tutors and other learners, and to propose solutions to any problems regarding their study.
- (ii) Learners’ mentoring – learner is encourages to learn from peers, share information with others, ask for help (tutoring), and develop better time management and study skills.
- (iii) Learners’ awareness – learner is encourages to apply knowledge in his or her life/work, be responsible, be technical fluent, to learn self-directed skills, and to get career counselling from counsellor.

These subgroups show that learners could be empowered to take actions to further the successful achievement of educational goals.

Table 2 shows the three categories of how to prevent attrition as responded by learners. The findings found that, learners' awareness was the highest category for the way how to prevent the attrition with the 7 responses (54.5%). The category of learner's mentoring and communication were obtained 4 responses of each (36.3%).

Table 2: The Effective Ways How to Prevent Attrition



Conclusion

The primary goals of this study were to identify factors that have affected learners' attrition and what are ways learners can prevent themselves from dropout. The study found that the main factor of attrition was learners were over-extended or fully occupied with too many responsibilities. It is recommended that the best practice for prevention learners' attrition was learner itself. The top three ways to prevent attrition among learners were learners' communication, learners' mentoring, and learners' awareness. Learners' communication in which learner has to interact more and communicate better with institutions, faculty, tutors and other learners, and to propose solutions to any problems regarding their study. Learners' mentoring in which learner is encourages to learn from peers, share information with others, ask for help (tutoring), and develop better time management and study skills. Learners' awareness in which learner is encourages to apply knowledge of study to life, be responsible, and be tech fluent, to learn self-directed skills, and to get career counselling from counsellor. It is recommended that the best practice for prevention learners' attrition was learner itself. Thus, counsellors can alert adult learners to these issues as they enter the ODL institutions. The findings of the study offered two beneficial aspects especially for OUM, factors affecting the attrition rate among online adult learners and offered some ways in preventing attrition among online adult learners from learners' own perspective. Therefore, this study can be used as a benchmark for the faculty in handling the attrition cases for adult learners in open and distance learning institutions.

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