Student retention in distance education: are we failing our students?

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Student retention in distance education: are we failing our students?

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This paper brings together some data on student retention in distance education in the form of graduation rates at a sample of distance institutions. The paper suggests that there is a 'distance education deficit' with many distance institutions having less than one-quarter of the graduation rates of conventional institutions. It looks in some detail at the data for one well-known institution – the UK Open University – and surveys some of the reasons why such a deficit should occur and asks what the effects are on students, institutions and society as a whole. The paper suggests that one reason for the deficit is the 'category error' of confusing teaching with learning, and that institutions have focused too much on the provision of teaching materials, especially online, and too little on motivating students to learn. It maintains that there is accumulating evidence for the essentiality of proactive contact for overcoming dropout and the importance of making that contact motivational. The paper claims that such an approach is financially viable and can make surpluses for the institutions concerned if carefully designed. Finally, whilst briefly surveying some of the new developments in distance education in the form of Massive Online Open Courses, learning analytics, and the use of smartphones, this paper suggests more speculatively that rather than resources or organisation, the main barriers to increasing student success in distance education are institutional attitudes to student retention.

Keywords: distance education; retention; dropout; learning motivation; proactive motivational support; costs/benefits of retention activities; institutional attitudes; effects of dropout

Introduction

The contention in this paper is that there is a fundamental problem at the heart of international distance education – the problem of student retention and dropout. This paper suggests that this problem undermines many of the undoubted achievements of distance education and that it may not be receiving the attention it deserves. For example, the last three issues of *IRRODL* (to take one well-known and respected distance education journal) apparently have no articles in which the words retention, persistence, attrition or dropout occur in the title. This is consonant with the general level of attention paid to the general problem of student dropout in distance education research generally. A rough estimate suggests that, at least in North American and European research reports, student dropout and retention appear as the main

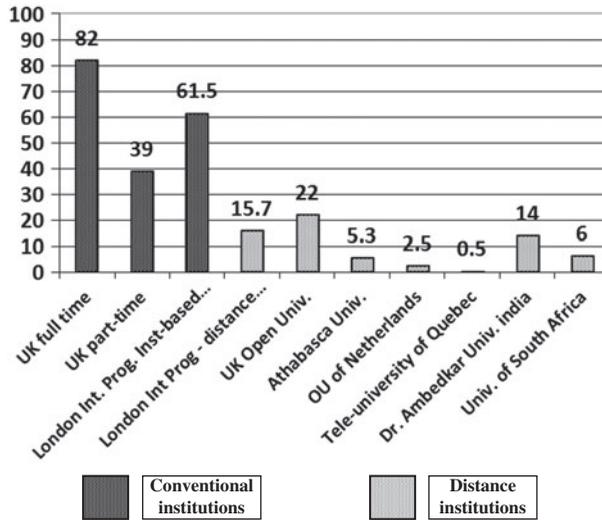---

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Figure 1. Graduation rates across a variety of higher education institutions (Simpson, 2013).

focus in less than one-fifth of the articles that are published in distance education journals. Whilst this is not proof that these concerns are not addressed in such articles, it hardly suggests that they are at the forefront of the literature.

Whilst it is difficult to acquire clear figures for student dropout from distance education, there seems little doubt that the data are much higher than in conventional education. There are a number of ways that institutions measure dropout rates, but since the benefits – social and economic – of higher education mostly accrue after graduation (Bynner, 2001), the best analysis is probably to look at overall graduation rates (see Figure 1).

One can see that the graduation rates for the distance institutions in Figure 1 appear to vary between 0.5 and 20% compared with more than 80% for full-time education in the United Kingdom. This particular selection of rates is simply from those that are readily available in the literature – not many institutions publish their data freely. It is of course possible that there are other distance institutions doing much better, including private ones. However, one of the largest private providers in the USA, the University of Phoenix, has only a 6% graduation rate on its distance programmes (The Education Trust, 2009). Some commentators refer to such institutions as 'failure factories'.

The London International Programmes are a particularly interesting example because otherwise identical courses are presented in both a face-to-face mode (via approved institutions) and a wholly distance mode. A direct comparison of rates is therefore possible and it can be seen that the distance mode has an average graduation rate of around one-quarter of the face-to-face mode. A similar correspondence occurs between the UK Open University (UK OU) and full-time UK graduation rates, where the Open University again has roughly one-quarter the graduation rate of full-time institutions. Thus it may be that there is a 'distance education deficit' where distance graduation rates are one-quarter or less of their full-time equivalents.

The 'distance education deficit' – why might it occur?

If the 'distance education deficit exists, what might be the reasons for it? The arguments below are drawn largely from UK OU data and experience, in part because the UK OU keeps clear accessible data on many aspects of its students' progress. However it is important to note that that the same arguments may not apply to other distance education providers and that the 'distance education deficit' may not exist in the same way in other institutions. In the case of the UK OU it has been suggested that there are factors such as the following:

- *Open entry.* The UK OU requires no qualifications for entry. Historically, students entering the UK OU with much less than conventional university entry qualifications had higher dropout rates than better entry-qualified students, which brought the graduation rate down. However, given the elastic interpretation of entry qualifications for UK part-time study and the decreasing proportion of UK OU low-entry qualification students in recent years, it is unlikely that this can explain more than a few per cent of the difference between the 39% UK part-time student graduation rate and the OU's 22%.
- *Students transferring to other institutions.* A proportion of UK OU students have always transferred out to continue their studies and graduate with other institutions. Apparently no formal estimate has ever been made of this fraction; Woodley and Simpson (2013) attempted to make an informal estimate and suggested that it was small – less than 4% of continuing students – which would have marginal effect on graduation rates. In addition, there is some compensating traffic the other way and a similar transfer rate probably applies to part-time students in the United Kingdom, who nevertheless again still have a graduation rate nearly double that of the UK OU.

Again one should remember that the argument for UK OU graduation rates being largely unaffected by transfer to other institutions may not apply to the same extent to other distance institutions. In particular, some distance educators might argue that a very substantial proportion of their students are taking only a few course modules to supplement their main programmes at other institutions.

It has not been possible in this paper to find comparable data with that from the UK OU. For example, it looks as though a number of distance institutions calculate their course module completion rates by ignoring 'non-starter registrations' (Athabasca, Office of the Vice-President, 2011), a practice for which there seems little justification and which would probably account for some of the considerably higher completion rates claimed by some institutions. Figure 2 illustrates the very substantial difference this practice would make in the UK OU, raising its stated module completion to assignment three to 83% (52%/62%) from 52%. It would be helpful for further research if institutions made their student progress data more freely available on an agreed basis.

- *Students settling for intermediate qualifications.* Over a number of years the UK OU has developed a number of intermediate qualifications for which students can settle before a degree – diplomas, certificates, and so on. This must
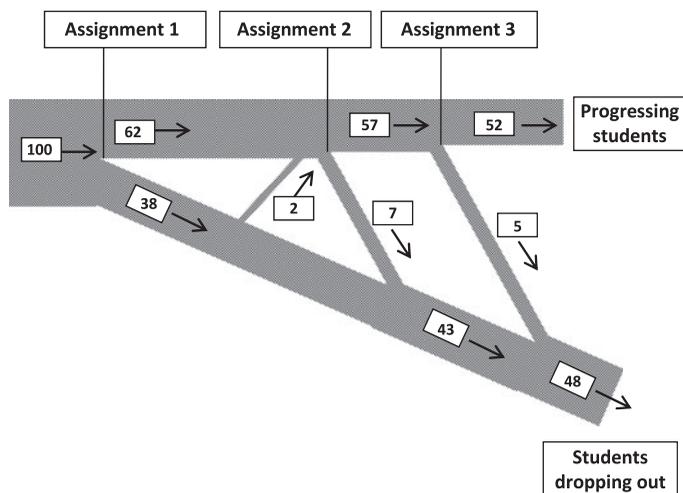
Figure 2.   A 'rivergram' showing the percentages of students progressing and dropping out during a UK OU foundation course module (Simpson, 2013).

account for some pre-graduation dropout but no data have been collected. Again a similar effect must apply to UK part-time students.

• *Students juggling with the demands of work, illness, bereavement and other life experiences.* Finally, distance students have many calls on their time and energy that must affect their progress. It is very difficult to assess the effects of these, but once more the same must apply to part-time students.

Whilst transfer out and settling for intermediate qualifications may have some influence on graduation rates, it is important to note that at least in the UK OU a large number of students are unaffected by such factors as they drop out very early in their studies. Figure 2 is a 'rivergram' for a period covering the first three assignments on a typical UK OU Foundation or introductory course module where the thickness of the 'river' at any point is proportional to the number of students who are actively studying at that point.

One can see that there is a very substantial dropout of 38% before the first assignment. To ignore this level of dropout as 'non-starters', as some institutions do, would increase the overall course completion rate hugely but without any research justification.

A few students skip the first assignment and return, but nearly one-half of the new students have dropped out before the fourth assignment. The overwhelming majority never return. So dropout is very heavily 'frontloaded', suggesting that much of the 78% dropout to a UK OU degree occurs not only on a student's first module, but quite early in that module.

Past performance

Set against the idea of an inherent distance education deficit is the fact that, at least in the UK OU, graduation rates used to be higher. Figure 3 shows some cumulative
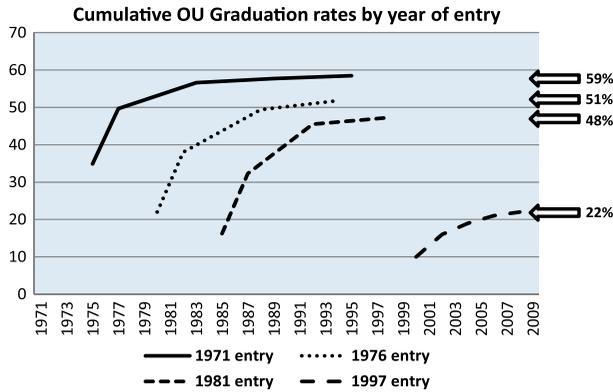
Figure 3. Accumulative UK OU graduation rates for 1971, 1976, 1981 and 1997 entry (Simpson, 2013).

graduation rates from the initial intake in 1971 to intake in 1997 (note that it can take up to 11 years for a cohort of UK OU students to reach a stable graduation level, so the data for the 1997 intake were collected in 2008).

One can see that graduation rates have declined from 59% for 1971 entry to 22% for 1997 entry (again because of the time taken for students to move through the system, it is not possible to obtain reliable data for later graduation rates).

In this analysis UK OU statistics have largely been used, not least because to its credit the UK OU keeps excellent records of its student data. As suggested previously, obviously it is impermissible to draw firm conclusions for other distance education institutions from these numbers. Nevertheless, given the UK OU's apparent position in the distance education world as some kind of cynosure of the best that distance education can offer, it would be surprising if these general trends are not repeated in many other institutions.

Distance education dropout – the effects

Some commentators are very relaxed about distance education dropout. As one researcher suggests: 'High programme dropout rates may not be educationally a bad thing for distance education. After all, the expense to students and society is minimal even if the water is cold' (Powell, 2009). However there are various factors that make this view far too complacent, such as the following:

- *Evidence that dropout does long-term damage to students*. There is very little research into what happens to students who drop out of distance education. This is a little curious since dropped-out students are up to 90% of its 'product'. However, this is not a particular criticism of distance education researchers, as there appears to be little research into dropped out students from conventional education. In the United Kingdom there is some evidence from Bynner (2001) who, whilst looking at the benefits of conventional higher education, also found some detriments of dropping out from it. His data suggest that non-completing students had higher relative probabilities of experiencing depression, unemployment and (for women) suffering violence from their
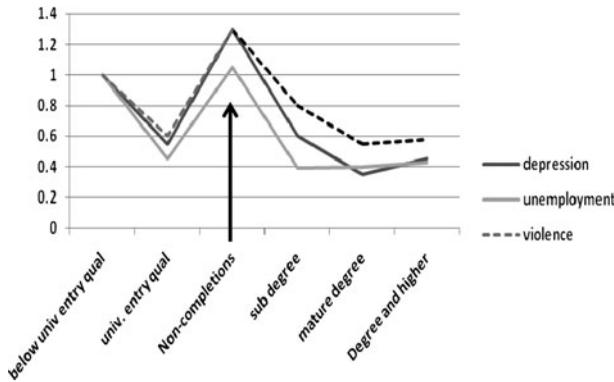
Figure 4.   Relative probabilities of depression, unemployment and (for women) experiencing violence from their partners, according to educational experience (after Bynner, 2001).

partners, than either graduates – which is perhaps not surprising – but also higher probabilities than people who had never entered the UK university all (see Figure 4).

   Some distance educators might take comfort from the thought that study may be a less significant part of a distance student's life, so that the consequences of dropping out are less important. However, there seems to be little evidence either for or against that opinion.

   In addition to these possible results of dropping out, there is a more certain one: dropout students will find themselves financially disadvantaged. For example, students who take out loans to pay their fees will find that after dropout they are in debt, but do not have an increase in income as a graduate to repay that debt. The result is a general increase in financial disadvantage and indebtedness in the population at a time when debt in many societies has become as issue of increasing concern.

- *Reputational damage to distance education institutions*. Imagine you are stepping onto a bus for a long journey and you are about to pay the fare. The driver says to you: 'You do realise that there is a 90% chance that this bus will fall apart before it gets to its destination?' Would you pay and continue to board? Possibly not. Yet that is the position of the many thousands of distance students who start courses every year. So far there seems no evidence from the level of students' applications that the reputation of distance institutions is being affected, but in an increasingly competitive educational environment this may not continue to be the case. Potential students may vote with their feet (and fees) and enrol at institutions that can offer them a better chance of success.

   And where governments partly subsidise distance education in order to increase the proportion of graduates in society, they may begin to ask whether their money is being used in the most effective way. Will they continue to invest in factories that are only working at 10% efficiency? For example, the Dutch OU is currently threa-

tened with a substantial reduction in its government grant due to its low graduation rate (Schlusmans, personal communication, 2013).

- *Effects on costs and access*. Other consequences of the high levels of dropout in distance education are the effects on costs and access. Whilst generally the cost of a distance education degree to a student is much lower than a conventional degree, the risk of a student losing their investment in time and money through dropping out are correspondingly much higher. And whilst distance institutions can claim that they are far more accessible to students, that access is of little help to students if the open door to their education is often a revolving door that whisks them round and out again, with nothing to show for the experience, but time and money uselessly invested.
- *Ethical issues*. Finally, there are ethical issues in inviting potential students to enrol without making it clear that the chances of them benefitting from their studies may be quite small. This is particularly the case where students are required to invest quite large sums of money as course fees. In the UK OU the fees for the equivalent of one year of a degree course are now £5000 (US $7500 at the time of writing). Whilst this can be taken out as a loan in certain circumstances, that loan becomes repayable once annual income exceeds £21,000 (US$31,500) and after three years (Student Finance England, 2013) – well before their 22% chance of graduating and its possible financial benefits.

The 'distance education deficit' – is it inherent?

If, at least in the case of the UK OU, the suggested explanations for the distance education deficit are indeed inadequate, then is there a reason in theory why it exists? And equally important, can any theory suggest ways in which it be ameliorated?

Perhaps a model that goes some way to explaining the deficit is Moore's 'Transactional Distance' theory (Moore, 1990). In effect this suggests that it is the inherent distance between students, institutions and tutors that contributes to lack of communication between them, and thus makes dropout more likely. In other words, it may be the isolation of distance students (from other students, their tutors and the institution) that is a principal factor in the higher probability of dropping out.

If Moore's theory is part of the explanation for the deficit, then the theory implies that improved interaction between students' tutor and institution would improve student retention. But what shape should that communication take? Perhaps part of the answer to that may lie in a 'category error' that underlies distance education.

Teaching and learning – a category error?

The philosopher Gilbert Ryle defined 'category errors' as errors in which one kind of thing are confused with another (Ryle, 1949). In distance education this confusion may best be illustrated by the use of the term 'e-learning' to describe what distance education institutions do. But what distance institutions are doing in most cases is not e-learning but 'e-teaching' – using the Internet to teach students using such

things as podcasts, forums, video clips, blogs, wikis, and so on. 'E-learning' is what we hope students do as a result of our e-teaching. It can be a mistake to confuse hoped-for ends (learning) with means to that end (teaching). The difference is important because, as Ramsden (2003) says, 'No teacher can ever be certain that their teaching will cause a learner to learn' (p. 8). Or as another educational philosopher said many years ago: 'The important thing is not so much that every child should be taught, as that every child should be given the wish to learn' (Lubbock, 1894). For 'children' I suggest that we should read 'distance students'. Merely putting more and more sophisticated e-teaching devices on an institution's virtual learning environment may not enhance student retention. After all, the first sign that a student may be losing motivation is that they can be less inclined to visit the institution's virtual learning environment.

Proactive motivational support

Thus paradoxically one reason for the deficit may be the focus and effort that goes into teaching in distance education, rather than other kinds of support. The researcher Edward Anderson (2006) believed that student dropout was largely due to one factor – loss of the motivation to learn. He said: 'The best predictor of student retention is motivation. Retention services need to clarify and build on motivation and address motivation-reducing issues. Most students drop out because of reduced motivation' (2006).

This paper then suggests that the answer to the improved communication required by Moore's theory is to emphasise enhancing a student's learning motivation rather than focusing entirely on teaching.

Anderson also noted what he saw as a particularly important characteristic of that motivation building by institutions – it should be *proactive.* In other words, the institution should reach out to its students. As he further said: 'Student self-referral does not work as a mode of promoting persistence. Students who need services the most refer themselves the least. Effective retention services take the initiative in outreach and timely interventions with those students' (Anderson, 2006).

So, in Anderson's view, to increase student retention in distance education we may need a system that is both proactive and aimed at students' learning motivation – what we might call 'proactive motivational support'.

There is some evidence for the effect of proactivity on students retention – see Table 1, which lists a variety of studies. These studies are so varied that it is difficult to draw conclusions except that there is clear evidence that proactive contact increases student retention. But it is not clear how far these contacts act on students' learning motivation, or what the most effective learning motivational content might be.

Learning motivation

There have been a number of advances in the psychology of motivation, associated with the field of 'Positive Psychology' (Seligman, 1998) and the names of Professor Carole Dweck (1999) with her 'Self Theory' as well as others. As far as known, these developments have not yet made many inroads into distance education, although it has been suggested elsewhere that distance education needs to explore

Table 1. Results of some proactive support studies in distance education including some data on returns on investment.

Study		Method	Finding	Notes
1	Rekkedahl (1982), Norway	Postcards	46% increase in retention	
2	Visser (1990), United Kingdom	Postcards	27% increase in retention	Small-scale study
3	Case and Elliot (1997), United States	Telephone calls	15–20% increase in retention	Between two and five calls most effective
4	Chyung (2001), United States	Telephone calls	Dropout reduced from 44% to 22%	
5	Mager (2003), United States	'Telecounselling'	5% increase in retention	Cost-effective 625% RoI
6	Simpson (2006), United Kingdom	Telephone calls	5.1%	Cost-effective 460% RoI
7	Twyford (2007), Australia	'Motivational emails'	11.7% increase over control	
8	Huett, Kalinowski, Moller, and Huett (2008), United States	'Motivational emails'	23.4% increase over control	Significant at 0.5%
9	Simpson (2013), United Kingdom	Telephone calls plus motivational emails	18.9% increase over control	

Note: RoI, returns on investment. Data from Simpson (2013).

these new approaches to psychology (Simpson, 2008) if it is going to radically influence the dropout problem.

This is not to say that improving the quality of teaching will be ineffective in increasing retention, but that to make a real difference there needs to be a partial redirection of resources from teaching to a focus on proactive individual learning motivational support.

Proactive support – the cost benefits

Even if the evidential arguments for such a move are accepted there will be a counter argument on the grounds of cost. One of the bases for the growth of distance education for many years has been that its industrial scale has allowed it to be a low-cost form of education (this argument has been taken to its logical conclusion with the advent of Massive Online Open Courses [MOOCS], which can have enrolments of many thousands of students at zero or very low cost, with so far correspondingly high levels of dropout – around 93% on individual modules in many cases [Times Higher Education, 2013]. Such levels of dropout on individual modules may imply a negligible graduation rate overall).

It is argued that distance education cannot afford the levels of funding that would be needed for a more individual and proactive approach. Such an approach would require far higher levels of staffing, for example. However, the arguments against proactive support on the grounds of costs are based on an over-simplified financial model that only looks at costs and not at the benefits of increased retention. These

benefits can arise directly in the form of increased institutional income from increased student success depending on an institution's particular funding model. Two examples of different models follow.

Example 1: directly funded by governments

One model that applied to the UK OU until recently was a model where the institution received a government grant which depended on the number of students who completed course modules. In such a case it can be shown that the institution will make a surplus on investment in retention if:

$$G + M > 100P/n_p$$

where G is the Government grant per completing student, M is the savings per student on recruitment (because fewer students need to be recruited to replace dropouts), P is the cost per student of a retention activity and n_p% is the increase in retention for that activity.

If the total number of students in the institution is N then the total surplus will be:

$$(n_p N/100).(G + M - 100P/n_p)$$

For example, in row 6 of Table 1 the figures are N = 30,000, G = £1100, M = £200, P = £10 and n_p = 5.1%, which gives a figure of:

$$(5.1 \times 30,000/100).(1100 + 200 - (100 \times 10/5.1)) = £1,690,000$$

Clearly the smaller P (the cost of the activity per student) and the larger n_p (the percentage increase in retention as a result), the larger the surplus will be.

Example 2: institution funded largely by student fees

Here the calculation is rather more complex, but the institution will still benefit from increased retention through more students completing their first module and going on to register and pay for subsequent modules. There may be other benefits – for example, the London International Programmes also have an examination fee that students only pay at the end of each year if they choose to take the examination, which they are obviously more likely to do if they have not dropped out previously.

So to calculate the cost–benefit analysis for London International Programmes, for example, assume that in any programme there is a fixed overhead £V per year plus a student related expense of £S per student per year. Then if the number of students on the programme is N:

$$\text{Total expenditure on the programme} = (V + NS)$$

If the annual student registration fee is £F then total income per year = £$N(F)$.

The total surplus income (if any) will be: £$[NF - (V + NS)]$ = £$[N(F - S) - V]$.

The surplus income per student is then: £$[N(F - S) - V]/N$ = £$[F - S - V/N]$.

If there is a retention activity costing £P per student, generating an increase in retention of n_p% students on the course module, who will then pay an examination fee of £E and re-register, then the extra income will be:

$$£[(n_pN/100)(F + E - S - V/N) - NP]$$

Then if there is a 4% increase in retention at a cost of £5 per student on a programme with 10,000 students and the registration fee is £800, the examination fee is £200, with a student related expense of £200 and a fixed overhead of £500,000, then $n_p = 4$, $P = £5$, $N = 10,000$, $F = £800$, $S = £200$, and $V = £500,000$ and the extra total income due to the activity will be:

$$£[4 \times 10,000/100)(800 + 200 - 200 - 500,000/10,000) - 10,000 \times 5] = £250,000$$

which is the increase in income due to increased retention.

It may be easier to see what is happening in these equations if they are represented graphically. For any retention activity to be self-supporting:

$£[(n_pN/100)(F + E - S - V/N) - NP] > 0,$

which becomes $(n_p/100).$

$(F + E - S - V/N) > P$

Inserting the assumed figures as before with the exception of P we get:

$$(n_p/100).(800 + 200 – 200 – 500,000/10,000) > P$$

which becomes $n_p > 0.13P$.

Plotting the graph of $n_p = 0.13P$ then shows that any activity costing P whose n_p falls above the line will be at least self-supporting (see Figure 5). The higher the point above the line, the greater the net return. Obviously these figures will depend entirely on the actual values of F, S, V and N at any time and the assumption that all the increase in the number of students completing one module will transfer to registration on the next.

It is worth going into the cost–benefits analysis of retention in distance education in almost painful detail because it is fundamentally important in student retention studies to understand the underlying economic imperatives. No discussion of drop-
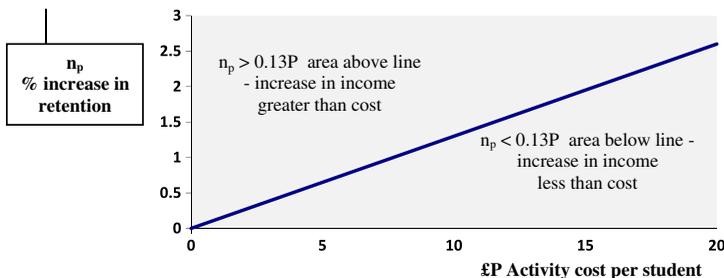

Figure 5. Graph illustrating the percentage increase in retention versus retention activity cost.

out can be complete without considering the financial consequences of any retention strategies and hopefully there is enough detail to suggest that for any institution not only can retention be self-supporting, but it can even make a surplus to the institution if well designed.

New developments in distance education and retention

There are other new developments in distance learning such as the use of smartphones, tablets, e-books, MOOCS and learning analytics. Will any of these have any effect on student retention and dropout?

- *Smartphones, tablets and e-books*. Many students now have access to smartphones so it may be that these could be used as a medium for proactive motivational support. There are also various apps that may support more effective study, such as study organisers or flash card systems. Tablets and e-books may also represent some kind of advance in terms of student retention if used intelligently, perhaps by building in self-assessment activities and motivational materials. But like other e-learning systems these can be costly and any institution must look at what gives them the best value in terms of student retention. It may, for example, be more cost-effective to use cheaper low-tech systems such as telephone support to decrease student dropout. This need not be in the form of person-to-person calls; several institutions such as the University of South Africa are now using SMS (texting) to proactively contact their students although I have seen no resultant retention data as yet.
- *Massive Online Open Courses*. MOOCS are currently the focus of much attention in distance education. These are online courses open to anyone and can have enrolment of several thousand if not hundreds of thousands of students. There is generally no support other than what is in the course materials and all assessment is computer-based.

As yet such courses are not a solution to dropout: as noted earlier, generally their completion rates on individual modules are often 10% or less (so overall graduation rates on a number of modules combined may well be negligible) and there is some doubt in any case as to the value of qualifications gained purely through computer-marked assessments with less than adequate identity checks. Their proponents argue that since enrolments are so great the overall numbers graduating are still large enough to justify their existence. This feels a little like the arguments of those First World War generals who thought that victory could be achieved by throwing large numbers of soldiers across no-man's land and against the enemy's machine-guns, in the hope a few would get through. In addition, there are questions of how MOOCS are paid for: whilst their industrial scale makes the cost per student low, it remains to be seen how many students will pay any cost for a less than 10% chance of a qualification whose resale value is in any case in doubt.

If MOOCS are to be successful it will be essential to study ways in which motivational materials can be built into the course material itself. There are theories of motivation such as Keller's (1998) ARCS Theory (Attention, Relevance, Confidence and Satisfaction) and Sweller's Cognitive Load Theory (Paas et al., 2003) that may help; there is limited evidence of the use of the latter in Impelluso (2009), for example.

- *'Learning analytics' or educational data mining* is a new field and is concerned with the collection and analysis of data about learners. The aim is to understand and optimise the learning environments for those learners. A relatively simple retention-focused example was used in Simpson (2006) who used a binomial regression analysis of previous students' results to attach a 'predicted probability of success' factor to new incoming students. This enabled the limited support resources to be focused on students with a low predicted probability of success, and a 5.1% increase in retention resulted.

As yet learning analytics is an area with promise for retention but no real findings regarding dropout.

Conclusion

This paper suggests that the biggest problem in distance education is student dropout, and that dropout remains a fundamental characteristic of distance education with probable negative consequences for students and consequently institutions. So far it is difficult to see what difference recent advances in the technology of distance education are making.

To make a difference to dropout we need to find ways of strengthening students' learning motivation, to make it more resilient in the face of isolation and the inevitable problems that arise from part-time study. There are lessons that can be learnt from recent advances in the psychology of learning motivation and it will be important to find cost-effective ways of applying them.

Distance education attitudes

Perhaps the main barriers to enhancing retention in distance education, however, are also psychological. They are in the attitudes to student retention within distance education institutions. Johnston and Simpson (2006) suggest that there are three main attitudes that staff in distance institutions can display about student dropout:

- The 'Darwinista'. Darwinistas believe in 'survival of the fittest'. They believe that students drop out because they're not intelligent enough, unmotivated or lazy. So they see their role as 'weeding out the unfit' and keeping standards as high as possible.
- The 'Fatalista'. Fatalistas believe that students drop out for reasons beyond their control. So they see their role as teaching as best they can, but that students are doomed to pass or fail and there is not much they can do about it.
- The 'Retentioneer'. Retentioneers believe that students most often drop out because of lack of proactive support. So they see their role as proactively enhancing students' learning motivation and helping them be as successful as they can.

There is some evidence for variations in distance education staff attitudes from an informal survey available online that has been taken by a number of staff in distance institutions (see Table 2). The scale runs from 0 to 100 – the higher score, the more 'Darwinista' the institutional attitudes.

Table 2.   'Darwinista' scores for a variety of distance institutions.

Distance educators' institution	'Darwinista' score
Korea National Open University	85
UniTech – Papua New Guinea	80
UK OU part-time tutors	45
Leicester University PG programme staff	40
Open Polytechnic of New Zealand	38
UK OU full-time advisors	28
University of London International Programme staff	24
UK University Association for Lifelong Learning	23
University of South Africa	18

Note: After www.ormondsimpson.com.

It is not alleged that this scale has a particular validity nor is it linked to student retention in the institutions concerned – there are too many factors involved. But the range of scores does at least suggest that there are a range of attitudes to students in international distance education and, as Johnston and Simpson (2006) propose, these attitudes may underlie student retention issues.

Ultimately then, this paper suggests that increasing student retention in distance education is not only a matter of finding ways to enhance learning motivation at a distance, but may also be a question of changing attitudes. Neither are easy tasks but both are well worth undertaking. Otherwise the future for distance education will remain uncertain.

Notes on contributor

Ormond Simpson is currently Visiting Fellow at the Centre for Distance Education, University of London International Programmes. He was previously Visiting Professor at the Open Polytechnic of New Zealand and Senior Lecturer in Institutional Research at the UK Open University. He has written three books, 11 book chapters and more than 30 journal articles, and has given papers, presentations and been a consultant in Europe, China, the USA, Canada, Australia, Colombia, Brazil, the West Indies, Ghana, Papua New Guinea, and Korea.

His latest book *Supporting Students for Success in Distance Education* was published by Routledge in December 2012. His website is www.ormondsimpson.com (accessed 8 March 2013).

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