

Proactive Intervention Strategies for Improving Online Student Retention in a Malaysian Distance Education Institution

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Abstract

Online distance education has become another way for institutions of higher learning to reach out to learners. However, learner retention rates in online distance education tend to be well below those in traditional full-time higher education. A clear understanding of what factors contribute to learner attrition, including withdrawal from or non-completion of courses, is necessary in order for online distance learning institutions to formulate appropriate retention strategies. This case study looks at the role of proactive interventions practiced by institutions to retain learners through an examination of data collected from departments within an online distance institution in Malaysia. Results suggest that among the top reasons learners drop out are those related to family matters, job commitments, and poor time management practices. This preliminary study aims to assist online distance institutions in better understanding the pattern of their learners' withdrawal, with the hope that it will lead to the development of guidelines for a more systematic evaluation of proactive retention intervention techniques to be implemented to reduce attrition rates in such institutions.

Keywords: attrition, dropout, retention, proactive intervention, online learning, distance education

Introduction

The use of online distance education has become popular over the past two decades, providing many benefits for adult learners. In many countries, online distance learning universities have been developed to respond to the educational needs of learners who are not able to attend face-to-face, classroom-based instruction at a brick-and-mortar institution ([Beldarrain, 2006](#); [Dooley, Lindner, Dooley, & Burford, 2005](#)). The growth of online distance education is partly due to the globalization and competitiveness of higher education and the development of information and communication technologies (ICT), which have brought about a dramatic transformation, particularly in the Asian region ([Jung, 2009](#)).

The online distance-learning model has gained paramount importance partly because of the fact that virtually anyone can participate and that the students can study according to their own schedules, making the university experience easier to accommodate while working. These online distance learning systems provide more opportunities for those busy working adults who wish to realize their ambitions in order to enhance their competitive edge for advancement, facilitate a career change, or for any other reason they may have for wanting to continue their education (Evans & Lockwood, 1994; Evans & Nation, 1996). Online distance education has become another way for institutions of higher learning to reach out to learners.

Yet, learners' retention rates in online distance education are far below those of conventional full-time institutions. Some researchers have noted that dropout rates in online distance education are believed to be somewhere in the range of 10% to 20% higher than in conventional full-time institutions ([Berge & Huang, 2004](#); [Carr, 2000](#); [Diaz, 2002](#); [Frankola, 2001](#)). Within online distance education, dropout rates also vary depending on the systems, policies, and procedures adopted by each institution and by individual subjects/units of study ([Pierrakeas, Xenos, Panagiotakopoulos, & Vergidis, 2004](#)). The learners' dropout rates in Europe and North America in online distance education programs typically range from

20% to 30% or higher; however, the dropout rates in Asian countries are as high as 50% in some countries (Pierrakeas et al., 2004). Student retention is in the very best interests of the institution as the financial impact of dropouts can be significant. According to Simpson (2003), institutions must analyze their own retention characteristics and "spot the leaks" in order to improve retention among their learners.

Undoubtedly, for most distance institutions it is imperative to have a clear understanding of factors that contribute to learner dropout, including withdrawal and non-completion of courses and programs, in order to formulate appropriate intervention strategies to assist in boosting retention. The purpose of this case study is to look at the role of proactive interventions from existing literature and investigate the validity and effectiveness of proactive retention interventions currently in use at one online distance institution in Malaysia.

Background for the Case Study

The delivery of open and distance learning courses in fully online format is a new phenomenon in the Malaysian higher education sector. These courses now play an important role in providing opportunities for highly motivated working adults to further their education without sacrificing their work and family commitments. The University that is the subject of this case study is the first private, charity-funded, not-for-profit institution in Malaysia to provide fully online distance education to working adult learners. Since its establishment and first intake of students in January 2007, Wawasan Open University (WOU) has provided distance and e-learning education to over 9,000 adult learners through its eight regional offices (ROs) in Penang, Ipoh, Bandar Utama, Klang Valley, Subang, Johor Bahru, Kuching, and Kota Bharu. The ROs are an important first point of contact, not only for reaching out to prospective students, but also for serving existing students. The University offers more than 39 online programs across four distinctive disciplines that offer degree programs ranging from doctoral to graduate certificates. The online distance learning mode ensures that learners do not have to sacrifice their work commitments by enabling them to study on their own time and at their own pace. The programs' structure provides learners with such flexibility in their progression pathway, where in any given semester, students are given the flexibility to register for up to three courses (or none) according to their own pace and time availability. Due to the nature of most learners' work or family commitments, learners sometimes skip one or more semesters, returning when their personal circumstances are more conducive for them to resume their studies. Hence, the active learners are those who registered for one or more courses in that particular semester and inactive learners are those who did not register for any course in that semester.

In a conventional higher education institution, the definition of "attrition" usually takes into account those learners who have failed and/or have been disallowed from continuing due to unsatisfactory progress. However, in the online distance education model, these statistics do not necessarily have the same meaning, since many online distance institutions do not bar students from registering to study as a result of poor academic performance. The distinction is that in online distance institutions, learners who fail all the courses registered during a semester can still continue to take other courses the following semester. This is especially so for an online distance institution such as WOU, although it is often not the case in conventional institutions. The instances where learners have formally requested to "withdraw" from their studies are only counted and considered as a dropout in the online distance model. In this view of attrition, as of March 2012 the number of registered learners who have actively and formally withdrawn from their studies is 617 since the University's establishment. Therefore, this reflects a relatively low withdrawal rate as compared to other institutions.

In order to obtain a clear understanding of the reasons learners withdrew from their studies, the University has asked every learner who has chosen to withdraw from their studies to complete an exit survey. Table 1 summarizes the reasons for withdrawal as revealed by the exit survey data.

Table 1. *WOU students' reasons for withdrawal from their studies (as at March 2012)*

Category	Percentage
1. Personal reasons (e.g., medical, financial, family commitments)	44%
2. Job-related reasons (e.g., frequent business trips, heavy workload, change of employment, irregular working hours)	34%
3. Course-related reasons (e.g., loss of interest, lack of a sound foundation in certain subjects)	22%

The University's mission is stated as follows: "We commit ourselves to the expansion of opportunities in higher education and to teaching excellence aimed at increasing the level of knowledge and scholarship among all Malaysians" ([Wawasan Open University, n.d.](#), "Our mission," para. 1). The issue of retaining learners is clearly of concern for the University. The signals from dropouts might indicate problems in the system and should be examined to secure the best possible chances for the University's learners' success by making changes where needed for the benefit of both the institution and students.

Student Retention in Online and Distance Education: A Literature Review

Learner retention is problematic in online distance learning institutions, as the financial costs of dropouts can be a significant issue ([Simpson, 2004](#)). Notwithstanding that online distance education is probably the fastest growing area of education, it has one fundamental drawback – the high dropout rate when compared to conventional education ([Boyle, Kwon, Ross, & Simpson, 2010](#); [Fozdar & Kumar, 2007](#)). While there are no conclusive statistics for completion rates of online distance education, some researchers and practitioners in the field claim that online learners seem to have a higher withdrawal rate and have more trouble completing assignments and respecting deadlines than conventional face-to-face learners ([Park, Boman, Care, Edwards, & Perry, 2008-2009](#); [Wilson & Allen, 2011](#)). Students in an online course have an 82% chance of completing the course, compared with a 90% chance in face-to-face courses. The gap was even wider for students in remedial courses: it is estimated 85% of students completed their face-to-face courses, but only 74% completed the same course online. ([Brown, 2011](#); [Jaggers & Xu, 2011](#); [Jenkins, 2012](#)). As definitions for the term "learner retention" evolve over time, so will the implications for online distance education. [Tresman \(2002\)](#) refers to retention as "students who do not complete course or programs of study ... formally withdrawing after starting studies, ceasing to participate in studies ... or moving on to another institution." Perhaps the most commonly cited and referenced theoretical model for understanding learner withdrawal is that proposed by [Tinto \(1975\)](#). Tinto's original theoretical framework has been adapted in order to suit the distance education environment by various researchers ([Kember, 1995](#); [Tresman, 2001, 2002](#)). According to the model, a learner's persistence is positively correlated with his/her degree of academic and social integration in the program. Tinto's theory suggests that learners arrive at college with certain expectations and aspirations. The integration or lack thereof into the learning environment greatly affects learners' persistence to degree attainment. The model states that in order to persist, learners need academic integration that arises from formal (e.g., academic performance) and informal (e.g., interactions with faculty/staff) activities within the academic system. The model also stresses the need for social integration arising from other formal (e.g., clubs, societies) and informal (e.g., peer-group interactions) social activities ([Metz, 2002](#)).

Many higher education institutions speak of the importance of increasing student retention, however, few really invest substantial resources in programs that are designed to achieve that end. Tinto (1999) posits that to be serious about retention issues, institutions would need to recognize that the roots of attrition are not only in their learners' situations, but in the very character of the educational setting. There are essentially five conditions, according to Tinto, that are supportive of retention, namely: (1) expectations; (2) advice; (3) supports; (4) involvement; and (5) how learning is fostered. Learners are more likely to persist in settings that expect them to achieve success. High expectations are a condition for learner success; unfortunately, it is often not the case that institutions place high expectations on their learners. Secondly, learners are more likely to persist in settings that provide clear and consistent information about institutional requirements and that effectively advise learners about the choices they have to make regarding their programs of study or future career advancement. Thirdly, learners tend to stay in settings that provide them with a sufficiently strong support network. Many learners, especially those in the beginning stages of their studies, may require academic assistance, while others may need social or personal support. Fourthly, learners are more likely to persist in settings that involve them as valued members of the institution. The frequency and quality of contact, regardless of whether it comes from faculty, administrators, or other learners, is an important predictor of persistence. Lastly, learners are more likely to persist and graduate in settings that are able to foster useful and productive learning. Learners who are actively involved in learning with and from others in such a community are those who stay until completion. The bottom line, as Tinto says, is that "students who learn are students who stay" (p. 6).

The student population in online distance learning is made up of mostly working adult learners. Adult learners have known attributes that guide them throughout the completion of a course or program. Specifically, adult learners possess characteristics that should be looked at when studying learner

retention strategies, which include: (1) readiness to learn; (2) vast and varying learning experiences; (3) intrinsic motivation; (4) a self-image to protect; (5) the need to learn things of immediate importance to them; (6) competing interests in life; and (7) learning when they want to learn ([Chrispen, Sharayi, & Chabaya, 2011](#)). [Nagel \(2009\)](#) and [Cerccone \(2008\)](#) posit that the characteristics of adult learners must not be overlooked in online distance education. The adult learning characteristics place heavy demands on how learners will achieve. If institutions fail to recognize these issues, they may contribute to learners' early departure. Presently there is no one adult learning theory that fits all students and is able to explain how online distance learning adults learn, just as there is no one theory that explains all human learning in general. Merriam and Caffarella (1999) observe that learning is a process, and that the focus of adult learning theories is what happens when real learning takes place. Cerccone notes that perhaps the best-known adult learning theory of all time is andragogy, which was introduced by Malcolm Knowles. The theory emphasizes that self-direction, the quest for flexibility, independence, and the process of learning itself rather than the content are among the most important issues for adult online distance learners. The author also states that adult learning is about change. The institutions, faculty, and administrators need to acknowledge that they are agents of change and appreciate that the adult learners are undergoing transformations as part of the educational process. As they go through these changes, effective learner support systems are crucial in the online distance-learning environment.

Retention studies have provided many different outcomes regarding the issue of retention in online distance education. [Ashby \(2004\)](#), for example, found that the most common three reasons for withdrawal by online distance learners at the UK Open University were falling behind in coursework (43%), general personal/family responsibilities (37%), and employment responsibilities (30%) that made the student unable to cope with his/her course workload. [Nash \(2005\)](#) found that most online distance learners dropped out due to poor time management and lack of time to complete their assignments. Although most online distance learners believe that distance courses are much easier than conventional face-to-face courses, perhaps some are unaware of or overlook the course requirements. Thus, when faced with the actual study workload, they find they are unable to balance their personal life, work, and studies. [Ostman and Wagner \(1987\)](#) also found "lack of time" to be the single most commonly cited reason for distance learners dropping out.

While distance educators have paid attention to the issue of distance learner dropouts and made efforts to understand factors contributing to attrition, less work has been done on the specific remedies to improve retentions in the institution. The presumption, expressed by Kember (1995), is that the attrition rate and persistence are highly influenced by different variables, many of which are affected in turn by each other, but few of the factors have been tested empirically. The author points out that studies that focus on single variables can be quite misleading and perhaps fruitless. Although research dealing with retention strategies can be found throughout the literature, and some of these papers offer important suggestions, each remedial strategy is quite unique and depends upon the institution's particular situation and its primary cause of student attrition. For instance, for a small institution with primarily adult learners, the introduction of a student orientation program, regardless of whether it requires learners to come to campus or complete it online, has been shown by [Lynch \(2001\)](#) to have a positive effect on retention. Following the implementation of such a program, the attrition rate fell by more than 15% while re-enrollment increased. The orientation provides learners with tips for succeeding as online distance learners. The general or course-specific orientation covers the basic requirements to function within the online distance-learning environment, which helps learners make the transition to online distance learning smoother. [Ludwig-Hardman and Dunlap \(2003\)](#) argue that student support services are an important way of retaining online distance learners. Such services encompass a wide range of activities aimed at providing a comprehensive educational experience to learners beginning from the time when they first enroll and extending until their graduation. [Boyle et al. \(2010\)](#), on the other hand, argue that a simpler way of supporting students and increasing retention is through a student-student (peer) mentoring program, a strategy that is often overlooked though it can make an important contribution. Groups of researchers from three distance institutions, namely the UK Open University, Korea National Open University, and the Open Polytechnic of New Zealand, jointly initiated a peer-mentoring program that targeted retention. The scheme facilitated mentoring arrangements in which experienced learners helped newer learners, or learners in the same course helped each other, thus increasing the engagement of disadvantaged groups to become successful. Results of that study suggest that mentoring of this kind can increase the retention rate substantially and the implementation of the program can be low or zero cost for the institutions. [Hill \(2007\)](#) asserts that institutions must maintain regular open communication with their learners, especially in a distance-learning environment wherein the opportunities for a "personal

touch" are limited. The author points out that this is very important, in particular, for the newcomer to online distance learning. Once someone is registered as a new student, the program coordinator must make contact with that student to ensure that he/she has all the materials needed to proceed. [Hill \(2006\)](#) offers the following tips for improving retention of distance learners, among others:

- Establish an "early alert" program that makes it possible to identify learners who are at risk of dropping out;
- Provide student services similar to those found in a conventional institution (e.g., counseling) to online distance learners;
- Create an online peer-tutoring program that promotes learning among students;
- Implement an induction (orientation) program that assists first-time online distance learners in adapting to the new learning environment;
- Involve faculty in needs assessment and planning, as they are at the frontline of the retention issue.

[Yoder \(2005\)](#) suggests the following proactive strategies in promoting communication and problem solving for both administrative and academic functions that can increase learner satisfaction and retention (p. 3):

- 1) Make sure that students know about the administrative resources available to them so that registration and admissions procedures are straightforward and any problems can be addressed quickly and effectively.
- 2) Encourage and support opportunities for students to get to know each other and develop support systems within the class.
- 3) Provide timely and useful feedback about class assignments and discussion contributions.
- 4) Facilitate class discussions and intervene when students need to refocus.
- 5) Monitor discussions and other class activities. If a student is falling behind or appears to be struggling with assignments, contact them personally and offer assistance.

[Martinez \(2003\)](#) recommends designing attrition management plans aimed at addressing retention issues. The comprehensive attrition planning should deal with retention issues based on a coherent framework combined with an effective method for measuring learners' progress as the key component. What this means is that the institutions concerned must have a viable strategy in place to manage, minimize, and eradicate the attrition. The author also strongly notes that the attrition management plan must take into consideration and integrate neurobiological characteristics of learners, such as the individual's desire for independence, goal orientation, and locus of control. These characteristics can impact factors commonly associated with learner retention and attrition.

In summary, factors affecting retention or attrition decisions of online distance learners are complex and constantly evolving. In today's environment, the understanding of retention is becoming even more complex and multifaceted, particularly with the changing landscapes in learners' social-demographic characteristics, their personal needs and perceptions, and advanced ICT-enhanced modes of instruction and learning. Procedural differences at the institutional level, such as in measuring retention rates, often vary and often lead to inconclusive results in empirical studies conducted by individual institutions. Echoing [Berge and Huang \(2004\)](#), [Pierrakeas et al. \(2004\)](#) claim that attrition rates vary greatly depending on the institution itself and by selected subjects of study. For instance, each institution is dynamically unique in their own terms of academic emphases, institutional culture, and setup. Nevertheless, it is always in the best interest of each institution to look into the contributing factors of their learners' attrition and determine the appropriate proactive intervention.

Proactive Interventions for Addressing Student Retention at Wawasan Open University

Data collected by WOU show strong indications that learners are under considerable pressure to manage personal commitments to family, work, and study, conditions that often play an important factor in learners' decisions to withdraw. External factors such as family and work that are outside the control of the institution impose a particular challenge. Nevertheless, the University is usually in a position to anticipate and deal with challenges when and where they arise by positively integrating learners into the

institutional setting. If the University can concentrate on improving students' learning experiences, they will more likely persist in their course of studies, according to [Tinto \(1975\)](#).

WOU has established several strategies designed for learner retention. A number of proactive intervention strategies by the University are discussed below.

Strategies Prior to the Start of the Learning Journey

Online distance learners' learning journey starts when they make the initial enquiry to the university. According to Simpson (2003), institutions must analyze their own retention characteristics and "spot the leaks." Strategies should be initiated when the learning journey begins in order to ensure learners are given proper information and advice on courses and programs.

- *Admission strategy.* The University pays close attention to the admission policies as a first step in reducing attrition by setting adequate testing that streamlines who will be successful and complete the programs. The University is one of three universities in the country approved by the Malaysian Ministry Of Higher Education to take in learners under the Open Entry Admission System. Under this system, learners above 21 years old can be admitted to the University if they meet the minimum requirements. The Open Entry Admission Test and Headstart program are two initiatives that were introduced to streamline the potential learners before fully admitting them into the programs. The potential candidates who have failed the Open Entry Admission test are required to undergo and successfully complete a Headstart program. The Headstart program is a 20-week program conducted in a face-to-face mode with the objective of preparing the candidates for online distance learning. The program strives to instill the appropriate attitude for independent learning, which helps address gaps in the candidates' academic proficiency.
- *Proper advice and guidance that helps learners make informed choices.* All learners registering at the ROs are given proper guidance before admission takes place. Potential learners are given proper advice and guidance by the ROs' officers to assist them in areas such as program and course selection. Learners are then more likely to make informed choices regarding their course of study, which helps reduce the likelihood of dropping out later on. Clearly, with the proper advice and guidance provided, learners are informed, know what to expect, and can plan for their study experience.
- *New learner orientation (induction) program.* Orientation for students who are new to the system is held prior to the beginning of each semester. It takes place across all the regional learning centers in the country and is usually presided over by senior academic staff. The orientation program aims at providing the students with the learning skills needed to work in an online distance-learning environment. During this daylong event (usually running from 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.), learners are briefed on the online distance learning model, the learning skills required, the learning support provided by the University, as well as the University's various regulations. In addition, learners gain hands-on experience logging in to the University's e-library and the online learning management system (LMS). By the end of the program, learners are acclimated to the University community and have practiced applying the self-directed learning skills necessary to be successful in the online distance environment.

Face-to-Face Tutorial Sessions

Research on distance education stresses that study materials in and of themselves, even if well designed, do not constitute a complete learning experience. With that in mind, the learners in any online distance education program need dialogue and feedback. This is where the tutors come into the picture; their role is to provide this important support in the learning experience. Tutorials are the most common type of face-to-face meeting and are designed to offer support to learners. In each course, there are five scheduled tutorial sessions over an 18-week semester. These tutorials are held during weekends as an effective way of providing support and bringing learners, mostly working adults, together as a group and encouraging and fostering mutual support. Although the learners' participation in the tutorials is not mandatory, the tutorials have been able to facilitate opportunities to have face-to-face contact with their peers as well as to overcome the issue of a lack of connection that could lead to eventual withdrawal.

Learner Support Service Strategies

Evidence gathered from various studies ([Hill, 2006, 2007](#); [Ludwig-Hardman & Dunlap, 2003](#); [Yoder, 2005](#)) shows that support services offered by the institutions play a crucially important role in promoting distance learner retention. Support services include a cluster of facilities and activities that are intended to make the learning process easier and more meaningful. All of these services go beyond the quality course material to assist in the progress of students in terms of learning, interacting, and promoting effective communication. The support services may range from regional centers' advising and counseling/tutorial support, to academics and administrative problem solving. These provide essential elements that help learners feel a sense of belonging, which in turn reduces the likelihood of dropping out.

An extensive system of learner support services is in place at WOU to assist learners during the initial presentation of the courses and after the completion of courses. These include the following:

- *Toll-free Careline.* The "click-to-call" Careline is free of charge to learners from across the country. They can contact the experienced customer care support teams who are highly trained to provide assistance whether it is related to academic or to administrative related matters. The main objective of the Careline is to provide a wide range of support services; it is not limited to new prospects, but provides services to existing learners who need interpersonal guidance as well.
- *Online support via Facebook, Twitter, and the LMS.* An online learning environment in the form of a LMS, together with a number of Web 2.0-based social networking platforms – in particular, [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#) – enables learners from across the country to engage in threaded and forum discussions with members of their own tutorial group, as well as with other learners, and has tremendously helped to facilitate the learning process. The LMS is commonly used for uploading online course content, course updates, important announcements, and other administrative related matters to keep students engaged and interacting with their peers. Since online support using Facebook and Twitter was established in 2008, more than 5,181 registered learners have participated in this initiative, with an average of five learners posting comments to threaded discussions on the University's Facebook page per day. The Twitter platform is predominantly designed for better outreach and to inform learners who are registered Twitter users of any past or upcoming events organized by the University. These platforms have provided better communication and assisted in informing learners of both academic and non-academic developments in the University community.
- *Regional support and learning centers.* [Lata Sharma \(2002\)](#) asserts that the main aim in online distance learning is to promote self-study or independent study among students. To achieve this end the institution provides local support, regional support, and learning centers in diverse and remote locations. The institution has ROs located in Penang, Ipoh, Kuala Lumpur, Johor Bahru, Kota Bharu, and Kuching. Those cities are major hubs and are centrally located in each region. For instance, Kuala Lumpur, the capital city of Malaysia, is further supported by Regional Support Offices (RSOs) located in three locations to reach out to a larger segment of learners by being strategically located within this highly populated area. The ROs and RSOs play important roles as they are the first point of contact for the newcomer to connect with existing students or alumni. The offices are all-purpose learning centers, offering a comprehensive list of support services ranging from enrollment to financial guidance and attending to learners' concerns and grievances. There are plans to set up more ROs across various states in the country over the next five years to meet the projected increase in student numbers and student needs. As most of the learners are adults, the counseling services for academic-related matters are provided by trained tutors and course coordinators with subject expertise. To assist learners and potentially improve retention, the University is considering providing psychological counseling services in case such matters may arise.

Academic Intervention Strategies

The academic interventions are in the form of proactive participation by academic experts – the course coordinators and tutors – in learners' activities. Both course coordinators and tutors can track learners who are in need of academic support. This helps determine which students are "at risk" and who might withdraw due to poor academic performance. For instance, the tutors and course coordinators are

required to follow up with learners who do not submit their assignments and demonstrate poor academic performance to provide proper academic counseling assistance as well as academic support via the online forum or telephone counseling. This provides a practical link between the tutors and course coordinators and learners, many of whom feel they work in isolation and need a more personal touch when it comes to academic content-related problems. An interpersonal contact approach involving the tutors and course coordinators provides the positive motivational support, via online forum discussions, telephone calls, and e-mail, which helps learners stay on course. However, the interpersonal contact approach is not compulsory for all tutors and course coordinators, but is advised as best practice.

Marketing and Communication Strategies

The Marketing and Communication Department of the University handles all media and strategic marketing planning, media planning, promotions and publicity campaigns, and activities designed to increase the number of enrollments and retain existing learners. Among the retention strategy initiatives managed by this Department are the University's official website, a 12-page quarterly newsletter (published in both hardcopy and online format), electronic greeting cards and other e-mail updates (called "e-Link") sent to students, and physical posters displayed at the ROs. These keep the learners well informed about the latest developments and about upcoming events. Callbacks are conducted annually in order to encourage learners who were inactive during the previous academic sessions to return to their program and gauge the awareness among inactive learners of support services provided by the institution to assist them throughout the academic sessions. This is done via telephone and through direct contact with the inactive learners. The results of the callbacks revealed that the reasons students became inactive was often due to personal and career matters, changes in personal life adjustment, job relocation or advancement, and/or poor time management. Retention bonus strategies such as a free rebate for early registration, being put in a pool to win an iPod, developing retention-friendly financing, and other incentive schemes are strategies that have been developed to encourage learner persistence.

Discussion

Data from the exit survey conducted by the University and the callbacks to inactive learners show that the key reasons why learners depart early are primarily due to personal and career matters. Career issues, which include things like change of job or promotion, were the primary reasons for deferment and withdrawal. Personal reasons, including marriage or family problems, came in a close second. Not enough time for working and studying due to various commitments was the third most common reason. Only a fraction of inactive learners claimed that the reason for withdrawal was due to not feeling comfortable with distance learning or having a bad experience with the services provided by the institutions. Data gathered from the exit survey and the callbacks cannot be fully relied upon to show the range of learners' perceptions regarding their educational experiences that subsequently led to their decision to withdraw from the institution. However, the survey and callbacks reveal certain insights about the institution's learner expectations and experiences. Learners are under considerable pressure to juggle their personal issues, work, and study commitments; conditions that may lead to their ultimate decision to withdraw.

The existing proactive intervention strategies, as discussed in the previous section, have been able to target internally controllable factors (such as academic support, administrative support, social support, and others) within the realm of the University's abilities. External factors such as family- and work-related issues continue to pose a tremendous challenge, as these factors are beyond the University's control. There are a number of other potential strategies, as alluded to in the literature review that may be considered to address these issues. For instance, the University could design a comprehensive attrition management plan to address personal learner characteristics that particularly impact attrition and persistence ([Martinez, 2003](#)). [Rice \(2006\)](#) points out that motivational factors such as self-efficacy, locus of control, and self-regulation are important ingredients for success in distance education. The data indicate that most of the inactive learners might fall short in motivational factors, causing a lack of persistence when personal, family, and work issues arise. As noted by Tinto (1999):

An extensive body of research identifies the *conditions* that best promote retention ... Here the emphasis is on the conditions in which we place students rather than on the attributes of students themselves ... student attributes are, for the great majority of institutions, largely beyond immediate institutional control. (p. 5, emphasis in original)

Tinto's (1999) contention is that institutions need to recognize that the roots of attrition lie in the educational setting itself rather than in the learners' characteristics that are always beyond the institution's control. Looking at the five conditions (expectation, advice, support, involvement, and fostering learning) that Tinto suggests are supportive of retention, it appears that the institution did in fact meet these conditions. However, more in-depth analysis needs to be conducted to firmly establish this claim. Another area in which there is a possibility of providing a remedy in terms of learners' personal issues (e.g., family, work, or effective time management) is to look into professional and trained counselors, in addition to the academic counselors, who will be dedicated to helping learners work through and resolve these issues to maximize their chances of completing their study program.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Online distance education calls for greater self-motivation, commitment, and persistence from learners than traditional, face-to-face higher education. These are the fundamental requirements for continuing the programs in the online distance-learning environment and without these elements, problems arise in terms of attrition rates and financial difficulties for institutions. Many research studies about attrition rates have examined factors and identified predictors associated with dropping out. These may include family matters, career commitments, financial hardship, academic abilities, and dissatisfaction with the institution itself (including tutors, course coordinators, and administrative/support services). It may also be important for online distance educators and institutions to consider the impact of psychological factors such as locus of control and goal-oriented behavior (Martinez, 2003) on persistence. A highly goal-oriented learner persists and seeks education as a means for accomplishment or for their own personal objectives and goals, whereas the learner who has low goal-oriented attitudes will predictably have lower levels of persistence, and will be more likely to withdraw. Online distance institutions such as WOU may need to re-examine the types and levels of support they provide to learners in these areas. They should form part of a comprehensive attrition management program that identifies and further supports "at-risk" learners before they decide to withdraw.

In short, online distance institutions should consider putting in place mechanisms for systematically collecting and analyzing data pertaining to their students' persistence in continuing their studies. With properly designed attrition management programs, online distance institutions can make sound decisions with respect to planning and policymaking and can provide effective future learner support services aimed at improving return on investment, for the institutions as well as for the learners themselves. This case study reported in the present paper provides an initial platform that may be expanded upon in subsequent studies. It is one of the few emanating from the Asian region that has considered the underlying factors affecting online distance learners' decisions to drop out. Although the limitation of being only a preliminarily observation like this cannot prove causality, this study does provide evidence that in the online distance education environment, learners need to have additional learner-supporting services that focus on the "at-risk" learners in order to support their continuity of learning, thus resulting in fewer dropouts. Future research is needed that provides a complete analysis of implemented proactive retention strategies to draw a sharper picture of the learners' reactions regarding the intention to withdraw. It is also desirable to redesign this study to further explore the measures of motivation and enjoyment of learners in relation to retention.

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