

Chapter III

Project Student Rescue: Online Learning Facilitation in Higher Education to Improve Retention Rates for Distance Learners

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ABSTRACT

This chapter reports on an ongoing trial project that is being conducted at seven Australian Universities. The chapter summarizes the project and suggests methods to facilitate effective online facilitation based on the preliminary findings, as well as findings from the literature. This chapter will provide a brief outline of elements that can be identified in an online facilitation system to help improve retention rates for distance learners.

INTRODUCTION

This research study will discuss an ongoing online learning facilitation project in higher education to improve to aspects such as student retention and unit completion (attrition rates), in distance learning. The discussion is based on a trial project that is currently being conducted at seven Australian Universities.

The availability of an online learning facilitator to support distance learning may address aspects such as student motivation and unit completion

(London, 2004), and could contribute to student retention. This chapter will provide a brief outline of elements that can be identified in an online tutorial (facilitation) system to help improve retention rates for distance learners.

OVERVIEW OF THE CHAPTER

Open Universities Australia is a consortium of Australian Higher Education providers with the aim of providing distance-delivered open access

to tertiary study education. Open Universities Australia is currently conducting an online tutorial support trial project that calls for a trial to measure the impact of providing additional tutorial support across all the skills units and a number of critical first-year units. The concept of “tutoring” has many diverse meanings within the online learning environment, and can imply stand-alone learning materials, the computer as tutor, intelligent tutoring design systems, and also the tutor (person) as a learning facilitator within the online learning classroom. For the purpose of this study, the tutor is a *person* that provides support to the students and assistance to the lecturer, within the online (Web-based) environment.

Studies on student retention can roughly be categorized into the following categories, depending on the emphasis they give to individual and environmental forces, namely psychological, societal, economical, organizational, interactional, and holistic theories. The focus of this study will be, however, not to determine the factors for student dropout, but to determine if a well-structured tutor support program will have an impact on student *motivation*, and thereby increasing student retention and throughput (persistence).

Effective online interaction will depend on how well the facilitator makes use of the online environment and the communication tools available. Certain elements of record keeping can help the online tutor structure the facilitation process. Conscientious record keeping may also benefit online learning facilitators themselves, by guiding them to plan and implement an appropriate course of learning support services, to review work as a whole, and to self-monitor more precisely.

Barriers to learning can cause learners to feel frustrated and isolated, and in turn have an impact on student retention. The online tutor can play an important role in eliminating or helping to relieve these barriers, which in turn can positively impact student retention. This chapter will report on the preliminary findings from the online tutor project conducted at Open Universities Australia.

BACKGROUND

Open Universities Australia is a consortium of seven Australian universities that was formed by the federal Australian Commonwealth Government as Open Learning Australia during 1993. After extensive market research, the name of the organization changed to Open Universities Australia in 2004 to better address the market needs. The aim is to provide distance-delivered open access to tertiary study, with the commitment to make higher education accessible and affordable for everyone who wants to study. Open Universities Australia consortium members hold shares in the company. The current shareholders are (Open Universities Australia, 2005):

- Curtin University of Technology, Western Australia
- Griffith University, Queensland
- Macquarie University, New South Wales
- Monash University, Victoria
- RMIT University, Victoria
- Swinburne University, Victoria
- University of South Australia, South Australia

The shareholders provide academic guidance, and the students obtain a degree from the provider, which is mainly responsible for the qualification, although students also have access to units from other providers. The largest segment of the Open Universities Australia market is defined as adult learners ranging from average ages of 25-50 years, although there are also students enrolled who are well into their sixties. Most students are full-time or part-time employed, and would find it difficult to attend on-campus classes.

Findings from the Student and Portal Members Online Survey Results (London, 2004) furthermore reported that past Open Universities Australia students identified “insufficient tutorial support” (47% of total population) and “staying motivated” (50% of total population) as

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