

Chapter 20

Attrition in the Digital Age: Reminders from the Literature

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ABSTRACT

Distance education (learning and teaching by distance modes of information exchange) is often characterised by having higher attrition rates (often labelled as “drop-out” or “withdrawal”) compared to traditional face-to-face (or “on-campus”) education. It has been claimed that no area of research in distance education has received more attention; such is the concern surrounding attrition. This chapter suggests that a holistic understanding of the numerous, complex, and interlinked factors that may contribute to a learner choosing to discontinue their studies continues to elude researchers. Furthermore, attrition may not always be a negative outcome; for example, a learner may have achieved the desired skill set from their studies. In the current higher education climate it is imperative for universities to maintain student enrolments. Attrition directly impacts upon wasted expenditure and loss of revenue for an institution. Additionally, withdrawing from tertiary studies can have consequences for the distance learner. This chapter explores underlying concerns and identify key questions and gaps regarding attrition in distance education for the digital age.

INTRODUCTION

Attrition continues to be a key concern to institutions of higher education. Learner attrition equates to reduced revenue, and in the current funding-structure climate it is imperative for universities

to understand and address attrition. Despite all the research that has focussed on attrition, particularly in distance education, there appears to be much that is still needed to be understood and explored. This paper seeks to address attrition in distance education through an examination of associated

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underlying concerns and identification of questions and gaps in this area of research. First, a background, definition and context of distance education are presented, with attrition (also known as ‘drop-out,’ or ‘withdrawal’) being recognised as a key associated challenge. To examine the complex nature of attrition, models focusing on the factors which impact upon this phenomenon of distance education are explored. The significance of attrition in distance education courses, which affects learners, educators, institutions, corporations and government agencies, is also highlighted. Finally, research literature related to attrition in distance education is evaluated and recommendations are made for further research.

The majority of the literature referred to is no older than ten years. There is significant material prior to 1999, which has supplemented the more recent literature. Peer reviewed articles available on journal databases were preferred, although, in order to gain a broad understanding of attrition in distance education, other literature was not discounted. This paper purposefully does not include government policy, although it is recognised this literature adds a further imperative dimension to addressing attrition in distance education and is noted as an area for further research. Rather, the focus is to provide a ‘reminder’ of the literature; what has been investigated and how this is applicable to distance education attrition in the digital age.

DISTANCE EDUCATION BACKGROUND

Distance education theory, in the sense of a sustained, growing body of knowledge, generating theory through systematic research, began to emerge in the 1950s and 1960s (Keegan, 1990). Since this time there has been much discussion amongst researchers regarding an agreed, appropriate and applicable definition for distance education (Keegan, 1990). For the purpose of

this article, distance education will be defined as a system of education delivery in which the majority of learning takes place with the learner and the teacher (physically) separated by space (geographic location) and/or time, the gap between the two being bridged by technology (DEHub, 2009; Gallie, 2005; Holmberg, 1977; Keegan, 1990; Moore, 2007; Moore & Kearsley, 1996; Petracchi, 2000; Wedemeyer, 1981). The term ‘distance education’ subsumes a number of existing terms including ‘off-campus’, ‘external’, ‘online’, ‘non-traditional’, ‘correspondence’, ‘flexible’, and ‘distributed’ teaching/learning/education.

Distance education, as we understand the concept today, emerged in the 1840s, when Sir Isaac Pitman developed a plan for delivering education via correspondence courses to an “unlimited audience” (Carroll, Ng, & Birch, 2009). In 1969, the Open University in England began providing audio and video materials with its distance education course, pioneering distance education on a large scale (Moody, 2004). Over the following decades distance education became available in the United Kingdom, Germany, the United States and Japan. Distance education has transformed significantly since its conception, evolving through at least four generations. Taylor (2001) maintains that we are now in our fifth generation of distance education. Other researchers, including Connolly and Stansfield (2007) have noted the emergence of a sixth generation of distance education. It has been argued that the sixth generation of distance education continues to capitalise on the Internet, which appears to be the most frequent method of distance education delivery (Gallie, 2005). Learning technologies utilised by distance education, at present, include print-based media (e.g. hardcopy study guides or CDs of readings); voice-centred media (e.g. CD or MP3 recordings, teleconferences, podcasts, webcasts, or voice over IP systems such as Skype); video platforms (e.g., instructional videos, DVDs, vodcasts or interactive video-conferencing); web conferencing tools (e.g. Elluminate and Wimba); computer-centred

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