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Supporting Retention and Student Services in Online and Distance Education

EADTU Working Group on Retention & Student Services

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Co-funded by the European Union

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Published by
European Association of Distance Teaching Universities (EADTU)
Parkweg 27, 6212 XN Maastricht, The Netherlands
E-mail: secretariat@eadtu.eu | **www.eadtu.eu**

Disclaimer
This research is conducted as part of the Task Force Extending Student Numbers & Retention and Student Services. This Task Force is supported by the European Commission, DG EAC, under the Erasmus+ Programme. The European Commission supports for the production of this publication and does not constitute an endorsement of the contents which reflects the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

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Introduction

The EADTU task force on student retention was established in 2023 in response to recognised concerns of members in relation to declining enrolments, higher than desirable student drop-out and the subsequent impacts these have on income and regulatory scrutiny from quality assurance agencies and governments. As Roderick Floud pointed out as long ago as 2003, there is an inevitable, irreducible minimum number of students (around 3%) who may drop out (Floud, 2003). There will always be life events, such as ill-health, bereavement or change of financial circumstances which can prevent continuation of study for some students. In a selective scenario where only a minority of people were able to study for a degree and support was generous these numbers were small. However, with the huge increase in participation in higher level study across the world, the concept of a traditional student in an elite system is rightly no longer a reality. Rather, student bodies are now much more diverse and there are many more modes of study available and greater parity of esteem between vocational, professional and academic learning. Over this same period of higher education development, attrition, relative to overall student numbers has increased.

The earliest academic attention to attrition in higher education is usually attributed to Tinto (1975,1994) and others (Bean and Metzner,1985; Barefoot, 2004) who followed his attempt to model factors or characteristics which made a student more likely to drop out of American colleges. Elsewhere and more recently, researchers have tended to use a Bordieusian lens to explain drop out. (See, for example, Carruthers-Thomas (2015) and Reay (2004) for discussion). But what these approaches had in common was a focus on trying to 'fix' the students, arguing they needed to have a means to increase their social capital, to learn the language of academia and the rules of the game, in order to participate. It is only since the turn of the century and only in parts of the sector that there is a recognition that universities may themselves need to change to meet the needs of today's learners and their future lives and worlds. (Thomas, 2001; Burke, 2002; Quinn, 2005).

In this context, open and distance learning universities face a unique dilemma. Established to provide opportunities to those who may not otherwise be able to access high education, the very reasons students choose this mode of learning are usually the reasons they drop out. Indeed, the terms 'drop-out' and 'success' are also problematic, defined, as they are in the main, due to the requirements of regulators, legislators and educational policy makers. Elibol and Bozkurt (2023) in their mining of the distance learning research literature suggest that one issue relates to the way drop out is interpreted but also note that that there is neither a single factor nor a single formula to address attrition.
It should also be noted that retention is often linked to student engagement and a sense of belonging to an academic community. Other work on these themes is not addressed here but may form the topic of a future task force.

This report, prepared by and for EADTU members, aims to identify some of the factors which can lead to students in ODL leaving early and some approaches which members have adopted in response. The EADTU task force focused on practices and experiences where they had been implemented to good effect in member organisations. Studies and research on promoting student progress, retention and agile services to students were shared and there are many useful references in each chapter of the report. The group

compared approaches and good practices, consulting with experts in the partnership to identify strengths and challenges specific to ODL and to find scalable solutions. The anticipated outcomes included:

- Tools to develop strategies to improve study progress and avoid drop-out through identification of obstacles to successful learning in ODL
- The development of a frame of references with recommendations and guidelines to improve, and make more agile, services to students in ODL

Whilst the solutions proffered here may not be feasible for every context the range of ideas should be useful, particularly those discussed in Chapter 2. However, there is an important caveat – whilst ODL providers might define success in terms of students meeting their personal goals, regulators might not necessarily agree. In treating all higher education in the same way, they may expect similar outcomes as a condition of accreditation. Entering into negotiation and discussion may help but is not at all guaranteed to achieve any changes.

The report is structured into three chapters. Chapter 1 comprises three parts, highlighting firstly, the reasons why retention problems in distance teaching universities have become so pressing; secondly what the known factors are which influence retention and attrition in ODL; and thirdly the reasons commonly given for drop out. This, in turn, sets the scene for the chapters which follow in which EADTU members share examples of practice intended to support persistence and reduce attrition.

The next two chapters are made up of overviews of approaches, supplemented by linked case studies of good practice. Chapter 2 covers two overarching themes – curriculum design and the use of data whilst chapter 3 takes a lifecycle approach to intervention points. Because student lifecycle models emanate from traditional, full-time, campus based higher education it is not clear how well they are suited to the distance learning student journey, so we use an abstracted version here:

Figure 1 - Student lifecycle model

It is notable that the majority of the stages shown here relate to the early part of the student journey perhaps reflecting the importance of getting things right from the start. Arguably, chapter 2 also covers the bulk of the of the student learning elements of the journey but further work is needed to explore a more appropriate model.

In each of the chapters there is a collection of good practices which are linked to within the narrative sub-sections. These case studies can relate to one or more of the chapter themes but can also be accessed directly. References are also provided in each chapter so may be repeated but will make it easier to use for those focusing on a specific aspect of the student experience.

Defining the challenges

01

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The problem of retention for distance learning universities

Distance and online learning universities have experienced significant growth in recent years due to technological advances and evolving educational preferences, especially after the outbreak and lockdown due to COVID19. As the demand for lifelong learning increases, distance and online education is becoming a major avenue for people seeking to further their education while juggling other commitments. By offering flexibility and accessibility to students from all over the world, removing the geographical and time constraints associated with traditional face-to-face education, enrolment in online and distance learning universities has soared. Despite its advantages, the persistence of high dropout rates remains a critical and complex challenge facing distance and online higher education.

The problem of attrition has been a knotty one for distance universities since their inception, it impacts not only the learners' educational achievements but also the reputation and financial stability of the institutions. However, there is no clear consensus on definitions of concepts such as retention, dropout, completion or persistence. Marlon & Meneses (2023) argue that this lack of common understanding has a direct impact on research in this area, how it is approached, how it is measured and what interventions are undertaken in universities. According to the authors, echoing Nichols (2010), this issue is particularly relevant with regard to dropout rates, as it is necessary to determine who should be counted as having dropped out in order to determine the retention rates that universities want to improve, i.e. to define whether drop-out means not completing a subject or module or not completing a qualification or degree, taking into account also that a student may take a break but re-enrol again some semesters later to continue in their academic pathway.

The need to establish common frameworks and clear definitions has a high institutional impact on universities, since retention, dropout, success or withdrawal rates are often associated with the quality accreditation of the university and its programmes, the national and international prestige of the institution and even the funding they receive from public bodies. The in-depth study of the habits, needs and objectives of the people who enrol in the different programmes of distance learning universities, as well as the situated and national context-sensitive analysis of each institution itself, should allow us to establish these criteria in order to advance specific measures aimed at increasing retention.

Having stated that, we can widely define dropout as the non-enrolment of a student in a given number of successive semesters or courses (Marlon & Meneses 2023). For Woodley & Simpson (2014), “student dropout is the elephant in the room” and “dropping out is the norm and the graduate is the “deviant”” in open and distance universities, sometimes reaching nearly 50% of new students dropping out before the end of the course (Simpson, 2013). In different ways and at different scales, all the universities that are part of this working group experience high drop-out rates with implications at different levels:

a) At the **students level:** Many of the open and distance universities were created to facilitate access to higher education for those who, for various reasons, had been left out of the higher education system. Although the profile of the student body has changed and more and more people are looking to these institutions as a way to engage in lifelong learning, to change their career path or simply for personal enrichment, the main goal of distance learning institutions is to facilitate the success of the students. Recent research has shown that the achievement of personal goals is often

tied closely to achieving learning goals, given that “these goals represent what individuals want to reach when participating in a course, they act as a motivational basis for interpretation of learning situations and self-regulation therein” (Daumiller et al, 2023).

Another of the most important consequences for students who drop out of distance learning universities is the cost in terms of time and money: although open and distance learning universities facilitate access to higher education because of their flexibility in terms of both access and learning, if the student is more likely to drop out, the investment of time and money will put them at a significant disadvantage in relation to others who have completed their studies.

Meeting learners' expectations in terms of learning goals is the responsibility of universities, which must ensure the necessary support to guarantee that a student who is accepted to a course should be supported to succeed. Higher retention rates not only indicate the effectiveness of the educational programs but also contribute to students accomplishing their academic goals. As has been highlighted in a wide range of studies, students who persist in their courses are more likely to obtain the learning benefits of their education.

b) At the **institutional level**: Beyond the institutions' foundational commitment to ensuring that students acquire the necessary skills to improve their personal or professional lives, open and distance learning universities are subject to several forms of external monitoring, to which they are accountable, whether it be accreditation standards, governmental regulations, or industry benchmarks. High dropout rates can result in loss of prestige for distance education institutions (Simpson, 2013; Bağrıacık Yılmaz & Karataş, 2022), but the failure to meet the standards can also lead to the loss of quality accreditation, forcing open and distance learning institutions to devote great efforts to ensure and assure that dropout and attrition rates are not directly related to the quality of their programs. The flexibility of online and distance universities promotes a non-linear and non-sequential achievement of learning objectives, thus calling into question the suitability of the traditional student lifecycle model for open and distance universities.
Lower retention rates may have a direct financial impact on open and distance universities. On the one hand, given that many online and distance learning universities receive financial support from their governments, high dropout rates can raise questions about whether public funds are being well-spent and even lead to a reduction in the public funding allocated to them (Simpson, 2013). On the other hand, the difficulty in retaining students has a direct impact on the raising of funds through tuition fees, as it hinders the budgetary stability of institutions, forcing them to rely on new enrolments to compensate for dropouts, and obliging them to devote great personal and financial efforts to recruiting new students.

c) At the **HE system level**: As explained above, many open and distance learning universities were established by governments with the aim of being complementary to educational systems and to traditional universities. Their aim is to provide access to those who, for different circumstances, have been excluded from the higher education system or cannot attend traditional universities.
Despite an increasingly diverse student body, distance learning universities fulfil a social role and

provide access to lifelong learning opportunities for adult learners who would otherwise not be able to continue training for a fast-changing labour market that requires new skills. Increasing retention and completion rates is necessary not only for students and institutions, but also to address the challenges of our societies.

Student retention in distance learning universities remains a complex and multifaceted issue influenced by various factors. However, amidst these challenges, there lies an opportunity for collaboration. By sharing strategies and approaches, distance learning organizations can collectively tackle retention issues and foster greater student success.

Factors in DE that influence retention

A comprehensive understanding of the factors shaping student retention in distance learning universities is essential for devising targeted interventions. Extensive research has identified various determinants impacting student persistence in online education. Due to the importance of the topic and the complexity of the problem, numerous studies have addressed the creation of a taxonomy and theoretical models of dropout in adult learners to understand the multiplicity of factors that influence it. Bawa (2016), Choi & Park (2017), Marlon & Meneses (2020) and Bağrıacık Yılmaz & Karataş (2022) among others, have reviewed the literature on the topic and evaluated the different approaches on which such conceptual models are based. Bağrıacık Yılmaz & Karataş (2022) stressed the influence of dropout-based models on traditional universities (mainly *The Students Integration Model*, Tino - 1975; 1993; Bean & Metzneren - 1985) have had in the construction of models focused on adult learners and online universities (Kember - 1995; Rovai, 2003; Park, 2007; Choi, 2016; Choi & Park 2018, among others). Marlon & Meneses (2020) consider the interrelationship between the different models, and the factors and variables included in each of these models until the last one included (Choi & Park 2018).

All these models have determined a number of variables involved in both dropout and, by opposition, retention of students in distance and online courses. Such models operationalise variables into different categories such as internal factors (e.g. academic, social, integration, accessibility, commitment to goals, and institutional commitment) and external factors (e.g. non-education related variables such as student characteristics or student skills, work and family constraints) (Choi & Park 2017); student factors (e.g. academic background, relevant experiences or demographic characteristics), course/programme factors (e.g course design, institutional factors or interactions) and environmental factors (e.g. work commitments and supportive environments) (Marlon & Meneses, 2020); or learner factors (e.g., age, gender, education level or motivation for study), external factors (e.g., encouragement from family members, financial support, and physical constraints), internal factors (e.g., academic integration, social integration, technology issues, and motivation), and outcome factors (e.g., GPA) “as the meaningful factors affecting adult students' decisions to persist or drop out of online degree programs” (Choi & Park, 2018).

Without opting for one or the other conceptual framework and without the pretension of addressing all the variables of an issue as complex and multifaceted as the factors that influence student retention, some of the stressors identified by the members of the working group as influencing student retention and completion of studies will be addressed below.

a) **Institutional factors**: One of the common characteristics of most open and distance learning universities across the world is the high number of students compared to traditional universities. Many, like Anadolu, are referred to as mega universities with numbers in the millions, but FeU, OUUK, UNED and UOC, which are nowhere near as large, have far higher student numbers than other institutions in their higher education systems. Whilst excelling in the field of digital delivery it is recognisable, these institutions face some common challenges such as the personalisation of the learning experience and the individualized accompaniment of the student or the creation of a sense of belonging.

The limitation of the institution to provide quality training to affiliated teachers who usually come from other backgrounds can lead to a lack of understanding of virtual environments and influence students dropout (Bawa, 2016). Actually, the research conducted by Bağrıacık Yılmaz & Karataş (2022) found out that one of the most important factors in the educational process is the qualification of the instructor and their capacity for interaction with the students.

Despite being one of the main values of open and distance learning universities, the flexibility offered to students to self-regulate their learning pace in a degree programme can lead to them abandoning their educational goals. The chance to take breaks due to unforeseen situations, whether motivational or contextual, can lead to students dropping out, especially in the first semesters, when the financial and time investment is still limited (Grau & Minguillon, 2013).

b) **Academic factors**: the workload of the subjects and their correspondence in credits, the assessment models that allow the subjects to be passed, the flexibility in deadlines or the support in the choice of the academic pathway in the first semesters are key factors as well in student retention (Gonzalez et al., 2020; Bağrıacık Yılmaz & Karataş, 2022). In this sense, academic support and the integration of learning analytics to detect at-risk students is a key factor in student retention. The quality of learning resources, innovation in content delivery formats, accessibility and interaction with content play (Choi & Park, 2018) an important role in students' decision to continue their studies (Bawa, 2016).

c) **Campus life factors**: the lack of social presence and interaction should be taken into account when referring to dropout rates. The recent lockdown due to COVID19, has brought to the table the importance of student mental health, related to the loneliness experienced due to social isolation. Although for many students, the lack of constant interaction is not a necessity, for others isolation and a sense of loneliness can impact on persistence and without frequent contact and proximity, can lead to a lack of motivation and passive withdrawal from a study programme. On the other hand, it has been demonstrated that the interaction with peers and the learning feedback given by the teacher influence the decision to dropout (Bawa, 2016; Choi & Park, 2018; Bağrıacık Yılmaz & Karataş, 2022).

d) **Student factors**: to address student factors, first of all, it should be noted that the demographic and social characteristics of open and distance university students tend to be very different from those of traditional universities. The majority of students in distance learning institutions tend to

be part-time adult learners, with physical constraints (work, family...) and with diverse personal and professional trajectories (Choi & Park, 2018; Marlon, 2023). Many of these students have no choice but to study at an open and distance university because of their employment, caring responsibilities, disability, being in prison or in the armed forces, living in coastal and rural areas, or having difficulty finding the necessary financial resources. These factors not only make it difficult to access higher education, but also hinder the completion and success of studies, as well as the time needed to graduate. And some of these non-traditional students do not plan to obtain a full degree, as their learning objective, in some cases, is to supplement or to upskill their knowledge (Woodley & Simpson, 2014).

Students' academic background has been shown to be an important factor in persistence and retention. Open and distance learning universities often offer open access to students with the minimum prior qualification required by the education system. The result is a very diverse student body that may not be sufficiently prepared to study at the required level. The research conducted has revealed that "students with a higher level of education and/or more years of schooling were less likely to drop out of courses than their peers" (Lee & Choi, 2011 echoing Levy, 2007). According to the authors, the same is applicable to students that have had prior experiences attending higher education or online courses.

Student skills as well as individual characteristics have also been widely recognised by research as a factor in the success of completing an online or distance programme. Time management, self-discipline (Lee & Choi, 2011), and digital skills (Bawa, 2016) are crucial factors for the continuation of online and distance programs, as the student may underestimate the workload and adaptation to online environments. Moreover, access to quality infrastructure and facilities for online and distance learning has proved to be one of the reasons for dropping out.

External factors such as changes in the demand for working hours, the need to devote more time to family or financial constraints have a greater impact on dropout rates in open and distance learning universities than in traditional institutions, as there is a greater possibilities of sudden changes in an adult student body (Bawa, 2016; Choi & Park, 2018; Bağrıacık Yılmaz & Karataş, 2022; Marlon, 2023).

An in-depth, institution-based analysis can facilitate a better understanding of the reasons for higher retention rates. Addressing these factors through evidence-based strategies and proactive interventions is crucial to improving retention rates and fostering student success in online education.

Why DE students may leave early

As we saw earlier in this chapter there are many reasons why students drop out of distance-teaching universities (Choi & Park, 2018). Among such reasons, some relate to individual student experiences, their choices, abilities and motivation. Other's relate to some specific features of distance-teaching universities. Finally, some external causes, that is, factors not depending on the individual student or the university,

may have a major impact on the decision not to complete a course or program of studies. All these f causes may be interrelated and affect each dropout student in different ways.

There are three main categories of drop-out – active withdrawal, passive withdrawal or non-progression for academic reasons. This last is probably the easiest to understand particularly in scale operations where data can be analysed, and trends and variations identified. This is not to say that such dropouts are inevitable, rather that it makes it possible to identify where interventions might be needed. For instance, high failure rates on a module might indicate the need for better preparation of students in terms of study skills or to review learning materials on a specific topic.

Active withdrawal, where a student informs the university that they intend to leave or to defer study, is often due to personal circumstances. The reasons given can be used by the university to better understand the choices students make but it must be acknowledged that students may give what they believe is a socially acceptable reason rather than one they may be embarrassed about. For example, they may prefer to say that their employment status has changed rather than they were finding the course too difficult. Nonetheless, it is possible to discern some key reasons, mainly life events such as accident or illness, bereavement, caring responsibilities or mental health challenges. Finances are also frequently cited as are employment issues such as managing work/life and study balance. Surprisingly, the flexibility that is claimed for open and distance institutions can be a double-edged sword. Too many options – study intensity, assessment type and submission dates, deferral opportunities – can be detrimental to the student experience. At the same time there is also potential for inflexibility, for example about deadlines, examination dates and locations, that might act as a deterrent to persistence

Passive withdrawal may also be because of these life events, but the difference is that the student just disappears and does not inform the institution that they are no longer studying. This might be ascertained through engagement data, such as no presence in the VLE or failure to submit assessments but the reasons for this are unknown. There is evidence from EADTU members' experiences, however, that motivation and self-regulation are more difficult in a distance learning environment and that insufficient interaction with others can be alienating. Students may not want to admit that they are struggling with workload or that they chose the wrong course.

Turning to specific factors , a *wrong choice of course or program of studies* has been a key reason for drop out *(*Duque et al, 2013) and tends to affect academic performance and the whole process of learning negatively. When making the decision to enroll, it is not infrequent for some students to have a rather vague idea of the contents of a given program or the skills required to complete it, only to find at a later stage that their expectations were misguided. Of course, it is normally possible to know the main contents and skills of a program of studies before enrollment, but the relevant information and its accessibility do not guarantee that myths and preconceived ideas have only a negligible influence.

A second factor, sometimes related to the first, is *lack of preparation and study skills* to succeed in the chosen course or program of studies. Many Open Universities do not require prior qualifications for entry

and the average age of students in distance teaching institutions suggests that learners my have been out of formal education for some time. The demands of specific courses may also create barriers, for example, language,(Stoessel et al, 2015) scientific literacy or numeracy, or digital skills. A third factor influencing drop out is the unanticipated level of workload required.(Bawa, 2016) This dropout driver may or may not be related to having chosen the wrong course or lacking the required initial preparation. Some students may expect distance-teaching universities to be far less demanding than traditional, on-site universities, an expectation often unfounded. Distance-teaching universities are rigorous in maintaining the high standards pertaining to university education, but using a methodology that demands a different mindset than the one usually prevailing in traditional, on-site universities.

Students in distance education may also struggle with *motivation and self-regulation* (Hartnett, 2019). Isolation from other students and lack of proximity to teachers can impact on motivation and thereby self-regulation. These factors may also be linked to unrealistic expectations regarding the content of studies, the time and effort required to succeed, or lack of flexibility around assessment and examinations.

Students in distance-teaching universities include many adults that must fulfil work duties and have families or other caring responsibilities which require their attention. Fully-employed students are among those who are highest at risk to drop out (Stoessel 2015). This profile is very different to that prevailing in on-site universities (mainly young adults whose focus is study and whose personal life tends to centre around other young adults in the same situation). When work, personal life and study are thrown out of balance, study tends to be the first thing to be sacrificed. Imbalance between these three elements is a major dropout driver. For example, see Moore and Greenland (2017) ~~,~~ on employment requirements making it difficult to complete assessments.

Some other reasons to drop out of a course or program of study relate to the actual experience of studying in a distance-teaching university. Thus, in some higher education institutions the decision to drop out was influenced, above all, by a *lack of interaction* with peers and professors (Ilgaz & Gülbahar 2015; Stone & Springer 2019). The model of the lone student, isolated from their peers and teachers is still an image associated in some countries with the academic experience provided by distance-learning universities. Yet this image of isolation is now becoming either a myth or the product of choice. Digitalization and online resources offer new possibilities for building academic networks and communities of students. *Different* forms of interaction with professors and other students are gradually replacing lack of interaction, which results in more students having the option to interact according to their needs. In addition to this, some distance-teaching universities offer a variety of face-to-face events where physical interaction is possible. Nonetheless, there are still many students who find it difficult to fit the interaction in with their other responsibilities. Another factor is inflexibility, even though distance-learning universities have a well-deserved reputation for flexibility covering the whole learning experience (Todhunter, 2013). The *inflexibility* reported as a reason to dropout regards issues such as *examinations dates or locations,* that is, organizational or even logistical matters, a field where programming and scheduling with greater anticipation is crucial for distance-teaching universities, at the expense of a small, but apparently relevant, measure of flexibility.

Two dropout drivers can be considered as external to the learning/teaching experience. The first one is *financial distress*, (Bağrıacık Yılmaz & Karataş, 2022) Financial distress usually has external causes (loss of income, rise of expenses, unexpected costs, increased cost of living, or poor management of personal or family finances). However, financial challenges may also result from academic failure, as the cost of being a repeat student may be higher with each failure. The second external driver relates to *life events* of the kind that students in their adult years are likely to experience, such as illness, bereavement and caring responsibilities. As for mental health issues, they tend to affect distance-learning students *differently* only when distance-learning studies are the result not of choice, but of necessity, as in the recent Covid-19 pandemic (Wang, 2023; Lister et al, 2023).

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Overarching approaches

02

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In this chapter, we focus on two examples of over-arching approaches to retention - curriculum design and the use of data for analytic purposes.

The learning experience of students is the element that the university has arguably both the most and the least control over. The most, in that open and distance universities have considerable experience and understanding of how students learn in this context as well as expertise and excellence in pedagogy for ODL. However, students are individuals with many and varying characteristics and experiences, reacting to circumstances in different ways. When studying at a distance, less is known about their situation, mind set or motivation. Flexibility is thus a key element of ODL pedagogy and practice.

The first section, *Curriculum design*, looks at how universities can enhance flexibility of the courses they offer, through different qualification structures, milestone qualifications, individual study pathways, open educational resources and microcredentials for example.

The second section, *Data analysis*, examines the use of data in identifying at-risk students and determining appropriate intervention points. The ethical use of student data (Slade and Prinsloo, 2013; Tzimas and Demetriades, 2021) is an important consideration but the potential value in increasing persistence is evident (Banihashem et al, 2018). Open and distance universities have huge quantities of data available to them, in relation to almost every element of the student experience. Much of this is already used in quality assurance and quality enhancement activity, such as student feedback on their modules, assessment pass rates, instances of academic misconduct, awarding gaps between disabled and non-disabled students. Thinking innovatively about the possibilities, combined with machine learning techniques, pedagogic and learning design expertise can create powerful tools to support better understanding of what works for students.

Finally in this chapter there are five examples of good practice which can be accessed directly or through the relevant sub-sections.

Curriculum design

Student diversity is one of the biggest challenges for open and distance higher education and is a reason to rethink study structures and services. Student diversity manifests itself in many different dimensions (Chung et al., 2014; Stoessel et al., 2015), so the curriculum design must react to that.

A significant number of students who are enrolled in regular degree programmes do not pursue the goal of a degree for a variety of reasons. This phenomenon is most pronounced at distance learning universities, where students are usually fitting their learning into already busy lives and whose learning goals may be associated with specific aims, such as promotion or developing new skills. Dropout rates need to be seen from this perspective and curriculum design has an important part to play. The structure of qualifications could be adjusted to widen success in several ways.

Offering smaller modules with less than 10 ECTS can help to make (learning) successes visible more quickly – because small modules take less time – they are also able to increase student motivation. A report

examining the results of inserting program-specific, contextualized modules and instructors into an online student success course, indicated a potential impact on student retention (McLead 2019).

Recognising the long-standing value of the 'openness' of educational formats (cf. Ebner & Schön, 2011) is also potentially useful. On the one hand, it is about Open Educational Resources, i.e. freely available and usable material. On the other hand, it is about educational formats that are open to a broad target group without access restrictions. These formats provide orientation and preparation, especially for students who have not yet decided on an academic programme or who are still planning to enrol. These can be self-study courses, tandem programmes or similar.

Creating multiple formal exit points as part of curriculum design, as provided at OUUK and FernUniversität in Hagen can significantly increase completion rates. Here, certificates can offer an alternative to a whole BA program. They enable students to achieve individual educational goals below the level of an entire course of study and will still provide them with proof of a qualification at university level. As part of the design of the certificate programme, the requirement arose to explore thematically related modules for the certificates to give the certificate programme a better structure from a didactic point of view and to address the educational goals of the students in a more interest-oriented manner. Such certificate programmes offer a more manageable entry into academic education, an independent educational goal and a motivating intermediate degree. They also offer students who have difficulties or are unable to meet the demands of their studies due to work and family commitments a qualified perspective for leaving university.

Recognising the Success of all Students: The OUUK's Approach[GP1]

Supporting students to succeed in their goals is at the heart of all Higher Education providers. Distance Learning students face an increasing number of priorities that conflict with their study meaning that they often need to withdraw from their studies before achieving their intended qualification. Whilst they may have ceased to study before achieving their final goal, they may have achieved sufficient credit for a lower qualification. However, not all students inform their provider they are permanently withdrawing, as they may not return from a study break or reregister after successfully achieving credit. In these cases, Higher Education providers should ensure institutional processes are in place that recognise the success of their students upon ceasing to study by awarding exit milestone qualifications to students who leave with sufficient credit.

The importance of certificates has increased further due to the current discussion about micro-credentials in the educational landscape (politics and universities). In a dynamic world of lifelong learning, evidence of skills below the level of a formal degree is becoming increasingly important. Further development in this area of 'micro-credentials' (e.g. Varadarajan, 2023) is therefore of great interest. In this context, the EADTU project 'Modularisation of Continuing Education and Professionalisation by Micro-Credentials' (MCE) should be mentioned. The project is particularly concerned with the learner perspective and advises higher education institutions on the development of courses and policy stakeholders on the further implementation of micro-credentials.

FernUniversität in Hagen: Certificate study programmes as a type of micro-degrees[GP2]

In order to make the attainment of educational goals more transparent and to provide students, who in many cases are employed, with evidence of the structured skills they have acquired, the introduction of a certificate programme is a sensible addition to the array of courses offered. Using Psychology as

an example, we provide an insight into a certificate programme with different specialisations at FernUniversität in Hagen. In this context, we also present the first results of the reporting and the central student surveys.

The example of Anadolu University shows another way of ensuring more flexibility in studies to meet the needs of its students and increase their motivation. These metaphorically described as different "shades" of flexibility can be differentiated into pedagogical, curricular, temporal, spatial, technological, communicational, financial, and accessibility flexibility. They include various teaching methods, customizable learning paths, asynchronous learning, online platforms for remote access, digital tools, and multiple communication channels. For example, curricular flexibility includes the possibility to create individual learning paths as well as options to retake courses in order to improve grades. Furthermore, financial aid and accessibility services ensure education is affordable and inclusive for all, including students with disabilities. As the example shows these are measures for increasing the retention rate and reducing the dropout rate.

Anadolu University: A Giga Open and Distance Learning University[GP3]

Anadolu University, a premier Giga open and distance learning institution in Türkiye, has adopted an innovative flexibility-oriented approach to improve student retention and reduce dropout rates. This case study examines the university's strategic use of flexibility across various dimensions—pedagogical, curricular, temporal, spatial, technological, communicational, financial, and accessibility—to address the diverse needs of its expansive student population. By integrating these various shades of flexibility, Anadolu University not only enhances the educational experience for its students but also significantly contributes to increased retention rates and reduced dropout occurrences, demonstrating the effectiveness of a holistic approach to flexibility in education.

Data analysis

Supporting students to succeed in their goals is at the heart of all Higher Education providers. Yet in recent years, particularly since the COVID pandemic, part-time distance learning students have faced an increasing number of priorities that conflict with their studies. Many Distance learning students balance their studies alongside additional responsibilities, such as employability and childcare, and are often returning to study after a prolonged period of time. The question that faces Higher Education Providers is how to better support students without overwhelming them with additional tasks or activities that add to their time pressures.

Data insight and use of appropriate analytics can provide part of the answer to support providers in understanding how and where they should focus their staff and students' energies to gain the greatest impact on success. As universities embrace technology to improve their data capabilities and understanding of their students, they can develop methods to offer a more personalized study experience, one that can respond to their needs, demographic trends, technological advances, changes to funding and wider societal developments. Universities should become data-driven, something Anderson describes as 'building tools, abilities, and, most crucially, a *culture* that acts on data' (Anderson, 2015)/ There is, though. a risk of becoming overwhelmed – universities must learn how to use data evidence to provide actionable insight that informs their practice and priorities. Alongside this staff must be supported to

understand the context and interpret the data so they can take the appropriate action to support student success.

Building evidence- based institutional strategies and using data to implement proactive interventions will support student success and improvements in retention rates. These can be seen in institutional strategies and in proactive interventions in the student experience. However, the use of predictive analytics is not yet common, and this chapter focuses on the work being undertaken in OUUK as an example.

Institutional strategies

Developing strong working relationships between data teams and those setting institutional priorities can bring benefits both to provider and students. At OUUK the Strategic Analytics team began to share data insight about student performance relating to continuation of study and qualification completion rates. This insight showed the correlation between certain stages of the student journey and led to the development of a tool to explain the interrelationship between different metrics and help understand the drivers of success. The Student Outcomes Portfolio, a programme within the Pro Vice Chancellor of Students Office, questioned what the insight meant for practice and worked with the Analytics team to bring this insight together to understand its importance to university priorities. The portfolio gained an understanding about the importance of the first part of a student's study journey; learning that in order to have the largest impact on the success of our students, priorities should focus on the first module studied and specifically on supporting students between registration to successful submission of their first assignment.

In reflecting on the insight, the Student Outcomes Portfolio asked the University to prioritise activity on OU Level 1 (entry level) modules. This priority was shared with units across the University through the Unit business planning process and through stakeholder engagement channels. The portfolio continues to coordinate activity which supports priority setting and the sharing of good practice. For example, a Level One Workshop was held where key stakeholders from across the University received insight into why early engagement and first assignment submission is so important to Student Success. Attendees shared examples of activities they have implemented to improve student success up to first assignment submission. Following the workshop, a set of recommendations are being shared with faculties and units to support improvements in student success within the first part of a student journey. The recommendations are deliberately written at a high level to enable faculties to implement the recommendations in the best way for their subject areas, but example activities are shared with staff to help with implementation. The recommendations have been communicated to staff via a Playbook which provides the evidence as to why this milestone is so crucial to new students (and the University as a whole). It contains the recommendations along with proven 'plays' (examples) that have been shown to positively impact students to successfully complete their first assessment. At the time of writing, March 2024, the full impact of this data driven priority has yet to be seen. However, the University has clearly understood the message with staff embracing the importance of early success and the prioritisation of new students and submission of the first assignment. A key aspect to the success of this priority has been that clear messaging has been supported by understandable data evidence.

The OUUK's Data informed Priorities[GP4]

Supporting students to succeed in their goals is at the heart of all Higher Education providers. Yet in recent years, particularly since the COVID pandemic, part time distance learning students have faced an increasing number of priorities that conflict with their study. The question that faces Higher Education providers is how to better support students without overwhelming them with additional tasks or activities that add to their time pressures. Data insight can provide part of the answer to support providers in understanding how and where they should focus their and their students' energies to gain the greatest impact on success.

Proactive student interventions

One of the data analytic approaches all universities can embrace is the use of Predictive Learning Analytics; an approach in which machine learning methods are applied to allow tutors early identification of students at risk. At the OUUK an Early Alert Indicators Dashboard (EAID) was conceived to identify struggling students and provide timely support. It is a sophisticated system that produces weekly predictions, estimating whether students will submit their next assignment (Heredotou et al, 2019) as well as predictions of whether students are likely to complete and pass the course. The approach involves analysis of diverse sources of data and insights, and the automation of student predictions is made through hundreds of weekly-generated Machine Learning Models. These predictions are disseminated to tutors, module teams and student support staff through a dashboard. Key findings from pilots of the dashboard revealed that teachers utilizing the EAID significantly influenced student completion and passing rates, with students having between 7-8% higher chances of passing the course, reaching to 10% for underrepresented students, and those from low socioeconomic backgrounds (Hlosta et al, 2021). To support a 'culture that acts on data' (Anderson, 2015), he OUUK has adopted a university-wide integration of the dashboard, a move championed by the Vice Chancellor who actively encourages educators to embrace this transformative technology. Complementing this initiative is a dedicated support team that provides teachers with ongoing assistance through tailored training sessions, daily support services, and a comprehensive array of resources including a website, instructional videos, and pertinent documentation.

The OUUK's Early Alert Indicators Dashboard[GP5]

The Early Alert Indicators Dashboard (EAID) is a Predictive Learning Analytics tool in which Machine Learning methods are applied for the early identification of students at risk. Tutors receive weekly alerts based on predictive data, which enables them to make timely interventions. World-class research with large-scale studies shows that where tutors regularly use the system, students have 7-8% higher chances of passing the course, reaching 10% for underrepresented groups. The EAID supports a student population of more than 200,000 students, making it one of the largest implementations of Predictive Learning Analytics globally and changing the way online teachers help students, especially those who face difficulties, towards success.

Collecting, interpreting and acting upon the huge amount of data now available to universities remains a challenge. Yet there are clear advantages to tackling the challenge: being able to evidence the story of how certain student behaviour correlates to success provides understanding; providing staff with a clear window in the student journey in which to focus is evidenced to support interpretation and galvanise the staff and providing staff easy access to insight to allow early intervention are all beginning to show how they positively impact student success.

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Support along the student lifecycle

03

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This section addresses the stages of the student journey, highlighting the issues which may arise at these stages. As identified in the introduction to Chapter 1, we have used an abstracted version of the student life-cycle, recognising that the model is predicated on the experience of full-time face to face higher education students.

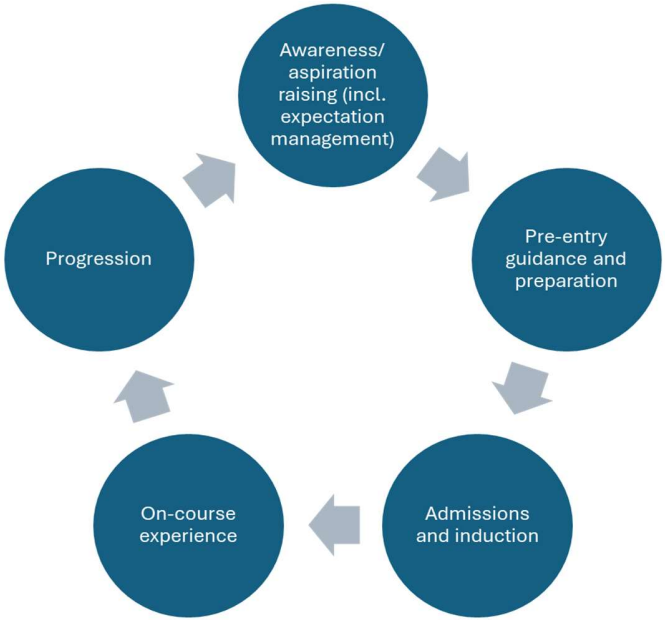

Figure 2 - Student lifecycle model

At every stage, it is important to ensure that clear, accurate and relevant information is fully accessible, easy to navigate and provided at the point of need. Digital tools facilitate this but there should always be space for human intervention. In the awareness raising phase, it is important to ensure that expectations are managed well. Of course, ODL is flexible in offering asynchronous study, choice of starting points and pathways, the opportunity to step in and out of study but things like assessment points and annual timetables are necessarily fixed and this needs to be made clear. Section 3.1 explores this aspect.

It is helpful to provide tasters and diagnostic self-tests so potential students can begin to appreciate what study will be like and whether they are ready or not. Once they have made the commitment (usually with financial implications) they need to know where they can get help if things go wrong – if they choose the wrong course or study intensity. Sections 3.2 and 3.3 address this part of the journey.

Section 3.4 highlights elements of the on-course experience which may create barriers for students and some of the solutions which might be tried. Section3.5 then deals with progression, either to further study, to employment or to re-assessment.

There are 9 case studies of good practice in this section, all linked from the sub-sections.

Awareness and aspiration raising & Clarity and expectation management

Prospective students have many expectations and assumptions regarding studying at a distance learning university. Not all of them match reality. For instance, a widespread misconception is that although studying a full bachelor program in (nearly) full-time students assume that it's enough to invest only few hours per week. The underestimation of time expenditure is among the most reasons for the high drop-outs in open and distance learning (Bawa 2016). Therefore, expectation management is a good investment for both – the universities and the prospective students, and has been intensified in recent years as it is described in this chapter.

It is highly necessary to draw a realistic picture and to address specific targets groups more and more in specific ways considering their special interests, needs, prior knowledge and availability of time. In this context, alumni and current students as role models play an important role in communication with the prospective students as they can best describe the efforts and challenges, but also the advantages of distance learning against the background of their life situation. That's why testimonials are often part of marketing campaigns, which in turn are intended to arouse interest in distance learning among existing and new target groups. With such marketing campaigns the universities aim to encourage underrepresented groups, such as women in STEM (Wes Crues et al. 2018), people with migrant background or refugees (Castaño-Muñoz et al. 2018), and attract them to study. In this case tailored marketing materials and alliances or partnerships with employers, unions, regional and local authorities, which are often organized or supported by the universities' regional centers or regional campuses, are important.

For some of the target groups, for example disabled students and professionally qualified students, the universities often provide websites comprising specific information and contact persons for them in order to give them the chance to weigh up the pros and cons of studying. Events either virtual or face-to-face round off the range of information and create a safe space for these prospective students. By doing so, the universities aim to foster a social interaction and sense of belonging right from the beginning, which are important factors to reduce dropouts after enrolment (Stürmer 2018). Of course, it depends on the respective national regulations regarding studying with professional qualification how much and in which ways this group can be addressed. For instance, some universities can offer (further) training for teachers, while others don't have access to this group due to the national system of higher education.

In order to convey a realistic impression of studying at a distance and open university, open courses or learning materials, which is part of the curriculum, are offered providing a detailed and representative insight into the learning model and level of instruction. These Open Educational Resources (OER) can be easily accessed via websites and/or learning management systems for free and in many cases without any prior registration. Prospective Students are highly recommended to use these OER not only to check if they have already gained enough prior knowledge and technical skills, but to get to know if they can motivate and regulate themselves adequately for an online-learning setting. As all three of them – prior knowledge, self-motivation and self-regulation – are critical for retention (Elibol/Bozkurt 2023), they should be considered during the study orientation phase. This recommendation applies in particular to

prospective students who have not yet successfully completed an online course, as the risk of dropping out is significantly higher for them (Lee/Choi 2011).

Additionally, an increasing number of the distance learning and open universities offer online self-assessments in order to give all prospective students the possibility to check if their expectations and assumptions match with the requirements of distance learning in general and in terms of the subject they are interested in. Subject-based online self-assessments tend to focus on the subject-relevant interests and prerequisites and therefore support prospective students to find the degree program fitting to their individual goals. In comparison, more general OSA are more about general attitudes to (distance) studying and they describe the level of flexibility, for example in terms of course and assessments dates. By receiving extensive feedback, the users get to know their own strengthens and weaknesses better and they reflect on their career and learning goals. Secondly, they learn how they can further prepare for studying, for example by using one of the bridging programs provided by the faculties, the student counselling or other departments. Afterwards they can proceed by getting into contact with a student counsellor in order to clarify any open questions before making a decision for or against enrolment.

FernUniversität's studyNAVI – A guidance tool for prospective students[GP6]

In line with the target agreement to provide all prospective students with the opportunity to complete an online self-assessment (OSA) before starting their studies, as outlined in the Higher Education Development Plan of 2020, the FURIOSA project (**F**ern**u**niversitäres **R**essourcen- und **I**nteressen-**O**nline-**S**elf-**A**ssessment) was initiated in early 2021. In the course of this project, the university-wide OSA studyNAVI was developed for prospective students. It shall help identify potential disparities in resources, interests, and expectations that may counteract the success of distance learning and provide recommendations for counselling and support services offered by FernUniversität in Hagen.

StudyNAVI has been available online since May 2022 and currently (January 2024) has over 3600 participants. Initial evaluations indicate that studyNAVI meets the set objectives and could thus prove to be another successful measure to foster academic success of distance learners.

Pre-entry guidance and preparation

Taking into account the diversity of their students, open and distance learning universities provide alternative starting points both by curricular design (see Chapter 2) and by a differentiated set of preliminary and bridging courses. As students differ in terms of their prior knowledge, the non-compulsory courses start at different levels. For example, at FernUniversität in Hagen the preliminary Mathematics course focuses on mathematical content of lower secondary school level, while the bridging course covers intervals, equations, inequalities and functions. However, Mathematics and Statistics are not the only subject addressed; data literacy and English language proficiency are also covered as these competences are crucial for learning success today.

Furthermore, many of the preliminary and bridging courses offered by the universities are also tailored to students' individual requirements in terms of their availability and use: most of them are self-paced and can be taken throughout the year, and prospective students can refresh previously acquired knowledge

even before the decision to enrol is finally taken. Since many of the courses are similar to the regular degree programme modules in terms of their structure and the way in which skills are taught, they give prospective and first-year students good insight into key facets of learning at university. Students are therefore acclimatised to the first semester twice, since their initial exposure to the courses reveals what lies ahead.

FernUniversität's English Learning Support: Immersive, interactive and open to all[GP7]

With its Internationalisation Strategy the FernUniversität in Hagen has, among other initiatives, established an English Learning Support service addressing general and subject-specific language proficiency by providing bridging courses and other learning formats. Although German is the medium of instruction in all degree programmes, students of all disciplines are compelled to contend with English language literature. Over the years, English Medium Instruction (EMI) has crept into the odd Business or Economics module; collaborative projects with other universities are invariably undertaken in English and students who are so inclined are welcome to submit their Psychology theses in English. Whereas first year students at bricks and mortar universities are generally school leavers with a uniform skill-set that perforce includes English language proficiency, students who choose the distance learning route afforded by the FernUniversität possess diverse educational and professional experiences. Thus, students for whom English was not a compulsory subject at school or those who have heretofore had little reason or opportunity to improve their English language competence have recourse to the English Learning Support service. What distinguishes the studyFIT English Learning Support measures from language courses available elsewhere is that the new bridging courses are designed with the university's curricula in mind.

To enable first-year students to determine whether their prior knowledge is sufficient, an increasing number of universities provides both subject-related and general online self-assessments. These online self-assessments indicate whether taking a preparatory course is warranted and if so, what part of the course or which content they should focus on in order to reach the required or recommended competence level. Many years of deploying these online self-assessments have shown that students generally only need to refresh or acquire some of the requisite knowledge. Therefore, as a rule, the courses have a modular design.

While the bridging courses mostly focus on subject-related skills, the orientation courses/modules provide more general study skills in order to lower the drop-out rate. In a compact format, they convey important information such as how to use the digital infrastructure, especially the learning management system, how to take a course, how to conduct literature searches and how to connect with fellow students. At some universities it is not only highly recommended that all freshmen take such induction courses; the students are typically automatically enrolled into them, although working through all the course materials is not compulsory. Considering the high percentage of students in full or part-time employment, time-management, learning techniques and self-management are amongst the key skills addressed using both research-based theories and tried and tested advice. Various approaches are presented in order to do justice to the diversity of students. The advantages of such a digital orientation course are obvious: all

important information is provided at a central point where students can come back again and again throughout their first months of studying. The same effect is gained by maintaining websites that feature key information for a specific study programme.

JYU's Orientation to Continuous Learning [GP8]

JYU Open has an important societal mission to promote educational equality. For this reason, JYU Open offers learning opportunities for everyone, regardless of their age or educational background. Since there are no admission requirements, students come from diverse backgrounds, including many who have very little or no experience with academic studies. Particularly for them, there are two self-paced online orientation courses: 'Orientation to Continuous Learning 1' (OCL1) and 'Orientation to Continuous Learning 2 – Pathways to Scientific Thinking, Reading, and Writing' (OCL2). In OCL1, students reflect on their goals, motivation, study skills, emotions related to studying, and their need for guidance. The course also assists in scheduling studies and introduces students to JYU's electronic systems. OCL2 focuses on essential academic study skills, including critical thinking, characteristics of scientific texts, reading strategies, defining one's writer profile, and overcoming writing-related blocks. Both courses provide students with videos, assignments, and ample opportunities for self-reflection. The purpose of these courses is to reduce barriers related to starting studies, and their implementation includes the use of metaphors. The course platforms have been developed in collaboration with a commercial partner. According to feedback from students, the courses are motivating and truly helpful for getting started with studies. They are also beneficial for those who already have a higher education degree or experience with academic studies.

Improving support regarding students' post-graduation expectations (e.g. the labour market) has also been identified as a plus for retention, for it contributes to increased student satisfaction and motivation (Stoessel 2015). This is why Career Services addresses students right from the beginning of their studies - also because professional reorientation can be a lengthy process that runs parallel to their studies.

Admissions and induction

Once a student has been admitted to a course of study, they often find themselves overwhelmed by the multiple messages they receive. These can include information about the course, about what they will need, how to access the VLE, how to submit assignments, where to seek help. The list is long and the information is important but can leave students confused about where they need to start - what they must do now and what can wait. An associated drawback is that the more messages a student receives from a single source, the less likely they are to open them, thus crucial information can get missed. Additionally, they need to know where to find help they need when things go wrong, how to develop the right skills to support their study journey and what peer support is possible.

Induction

Induction is a critical element of the new student journey but must be oriented to the needs of individual students and delivered at the point of need. Students do need to know how to submit their work for assessment, for example, but providing this information at the start of the course means it needs to be

retained, without practice, until the student is some way into the course. Providing a single source of all necessary information, either prior to course start or immediately at the beginning, to be accessed at the point of need, simplifies things for the students and the university as the case study on OU Ready shows.

OU Ready – Delivery of a consistent and equitable induction to new students[GP9]

First year success is vital for positive student outcomes and early engagement with preparatory material can be a contributor to this. This case study describes the approach taken to pilot a new Induction resource – OU Ready – on key entry-level courses at The Open University. Through provision of a more equitable and consistent approach to induction, we aim to better prepare students for studying at a distance and address some of the current challenges we face in this area. Findings from the evaluation of this work will provide recommendations for enhancements to OU Ready and evidence to inform a decision as to whether induction should become mandated for all new students.

UNED Online Reception Plan[GP10]

The subject addressed in this contribution is induction, understood as a set of activities and resources intended to introduce students to a new learning environment. Given the size and complexity of UNED, and the high dropout rates of students during their first year in a programme of studies, induction plans are a key element of any realistic, evidence-based retention policy. Induction at UNED revolves around the online reception plan, whose main features and underlying assumptions are described below. Students and faculty deem the current reception plan, which has evolved gradually since its inception in 2005, as both necessary and satisfactory. The key action of the plan is to create Virtual Induction Communities across UNED, giving students the opportunity to immerse themselves in university life and plan their performance from Day One.

Help when things go wrong

As indicated in chapter 1.3, one factor in withdrawal from study is wrong choice of course and a student may not realise this until they are admitted to the course and able to see more of what it entails. Ideally, students will have bene able to sample material prior to registration and utilise self-assessment tools to aid their decision making (See chapter 3.1). However, being able to get advice and guidance on how to change to a more suitable programme of study quickly is crucial in supporting students to succeed as well as mitigating attrition at the start of the course.

A related but perhaps mor significant challenge for students is finding the right level of study to begin. As we have seen, OUs often have very low, or no, prior entry qualifications and students may have been out of formal education for a considerable time. This can affect self-confidence but at the same time, some students may be over-confident and then find that confidence mis-placed when they begin the course. Having some entry level provision available that students can shift to with no financial loss can enable OUs to keep more students and get them onto a better pathway.

The OUUK's Fast-track access: a future model for widening participation? [GP11]

This report from the UK Open University is based on an innovation targeting students from disadvantaged backgrounds with low prior entry qualifications. The University's Access programme has

registered around 4,000 students annually since 2013, but a significant number of new students who might need a preparatory experience choose to enter directly at undergraduate level (as open access, permits). Internal data suggests that this has a negative impact on undergraduate retention and success as many students are insufficiently prepared. As partial mitigation, the Access team 'telescoped' a part-time Access module from 30 weeks to 18 and timed it to enable students to progress to undergraduate study in one academic year, therefore not adding an additional year to study time. As a result, a new demographic was attracted, more focused on the benefits of preparing for higher education. Initial evaluation revealed this group were highly motivated and had significantly higher progression rates onto further study than conventional Access students. The authors suggest HE participation and success could be widened by giving greater attention to the needs of learners returning to study, particularly in relation to the flexibility, duration and timing of preparatory provision.

Alternatively, students may have overestimated their time availability and need to reduce their study intensity (e.g. from three modules to one). The risk is they drop out of all their study because they don't have awareness of, or access to, the guidance on how to make the changes needed.

Skills

In addition to ensuring the right choice, level and intensity of study at the start of the course, learners need to be able to access the skills development they need. Digital literacy is, of course, important and whilst most people are now familiar with social media applications and the use of search engines, other skills may be required or could be enhanced, such as understanding and managing data.

The FernUniversitt's Data Literacy Basic Course[GP12]

The basic Data Literacy course is aimed at students from all faculties, especially those in their first semester. The low-threshold course teaches basic skills in dealing with different types of data from various fields. It has been designed as a self-study course that includes a series of asynchronous learning units of different types. Students learn basic techniques for the process model of data value creation, for categorising different types of data, for collecting their own data, dealing with data ethics and data protection issues, the legal treatment of data in civil and criminal law as well as the management of research data. Participants develop a critical eye for the interpretation of statistical results and graphics and develop a basic understanding of both statistical programming and generative AI tools. These basic data literacy skills can not only provide support during their studies, but also represent useful further training for their professional life. As the course is interdisciplinary, addresses a wide variety of subjects and can only teach basic skills due to the large number of different subject areas, it is difficult to provide empirical evidence of a concrete improvement in academic success through participation. However, students reported that they were able to supplement and improve their data skills through active participation in the course.

Understanding academic integrity is also important, alongside other academic skills such as reflexivity and criticality but these should ideally be built into the curriculum, perhaps with easily accessible standalone resources that students can turn to as needed.

Peer mentoring

Many students can benefit from peer support but his is not easily accessible in ODE, largely because students can be spread over great distances geographically, even internationally. Providing opportunities for synchronous and asynchronous contact between students and between students and staff, such as forums, on-line tutorials or other face to face experiences, can help to prevent feelings of isolation. It is particularly useful for new students to be able to benefit from the experience and encouragement from those further on in the journey. Mentoring schemes can be general (second year students supporting first year students) or more specific, such as for those with a disability. Not all students will want this, so schemes should be voluntary and mentors need to be trained and, possibly, rewarded.

FernUniversität's Virtual Peer Mentoring for students with disabilities or chronic diseases[GP13]

The Peer Mentoring project is aimed at students with disabilities or chronic illnesses, empowering them during their first semesters at the FernUniversität in Hagen. The specific mentoring provided consists of synchronous meetings – some organised by the programme coordinator and some by the students themselves. It is coordinated by the Department for Equal Opportunities and studyFIT, a unit that combines all extracurricular student support programmes. By bringing together freshmen and students from advanced semesters, the Peer Mentoring project responds to students' need to be connected with fellow students in a distance learning setting. Continuous evaluation indicates that the Peer Mentoring project is the safe space that students with disabilities or chronic illnesses are looking for in order to share very personal matters such as the way the illness or disability impacts their lives and their studies. Both mentees and mentors benefit from participation as both are asked to reflect on how they approach studying and how they deal with the concomitant challenges. A frequently discussed issue is compensation for disadvantages and the question whether or not to disclose the disability or chronic illness. Through the Peer Mentoring project, sustainable communities that outlast the initial semester are built and contact points at the distance learning university are made known. Additionally, by participating in workshops based on their specific needs, students will acquire general study skills which will help them to proceed successfully with their studies, thus lowering dropout rates.

The UOC's ESPRIA Project: Improving First-Year Student Mentoring[GP14]

This Good practice presents an institutional intervention carried out with the objective of improving the experience of first-year undergraduate students at the Universitat Oberta de Catalunya. The principal aim is to enhance students' academic achievement and, consequently, bolster their retention in degree programs by promoting their adherence to the educational model's learning methodology, which is centred on continuous evaluation. After observing a positive impact on all performance indicators and a net increase in second semester enrolment in the participating programmes, the institution decided to extend ESPRIA intervention to the regular management of bachelor degrees.

Summary

The point at which a student 'walks through the doors' and begins study can be very stressful. There is so much to know and understand in addition to the curriculum content that it is easy to become overwhelmed. OUs need to understand this and prepare accordingly. The importance of ensuring

accurate, accessible, timely and relevant information cannot be over-stated but it need also to be proportionate. Students are individuals and have different needs and requirements so support should be personalised. The use of peer mentoring schemes can also be valuable in creating community and welcoming people to it.

On-Course Experience

In addition to support by student services, the students' on-course experience is critical for student retention in higher education distance learning. The psychological phenomena making up the experience – the emotions, wellbeing, and satisfaction levels related to the course – are closely associated with study motivation, critical for study engagement and retention. Here, we explore how these psychological factors can be applied in course design to support study engagement.

In distance learning, students work independently based on instructions, study materials and tasks in a learning environment. Therefore, distance learning is relatively free from restrictions of space and time, but also challenged by decreased levels of study engagement and enjoyment. The diverse student population in distance learning requires individualized study paths for optimal learning and on-course experience. In general, adult students wish to feel competent, included, unstressed, and allowed to follow their interests and fulfil themselves in their studies. Taking cognizance to the psychological factors determining the engagement levels of the course, students' on-course experience can be modified. Here, we present practices in course design to enable and ensure students' experience of competence, control, and communality on the course. We focus on informational instructions, assessment, feedback, as well as flexible and interactive completion methods.

Active studying on a course is a crucial period in the student lifecycle. It is the period the least dependent on student services, and the most dependent on the pedagogical solutions. Nevertheless, students' on-course experience is as important for student retention as student services (Woodley & Simpson, 2018). The on-course experience includes students' affects, wellbeing, motivation and satisfaction levels related to the study content, course format and the pedagogical solutions applied on the course. Here, we explore these psychological factors that determine students' on-course experience, and how these factors can be applied in course design, and eventually, to support course completion.

The pedagogical solutions directly affect students' learning motivation levels. Motivation is the key to learning performance and study engagement. Therefore, pedagogical strategies aiming to protect and nurture motivation levels are critical in higher education distance learning, as it suffers from lower communality, learning motivation and course completion levels (e.g., Lee & Choi 2011; Lee et al., 2013). Motivation may not necessarily be an experiential factor per se, but it is directly related to affective states, such as positive and negative emotions and satisfaction levels.

To counteract the adverse effects of e-learning for motivation levels requires appropriate operational conception of learning motivation and wellbeing. From a psychological perspective, an engaging on-course

experience depends on satisfaction of four main psychological needs: 1. How confident and competent students feel, 2. how much students feel in control of their studying, 3. how safe and included the students feel themselves, 4. how significant the students feel the studying and the course topic (e.g., Ryan & Deci, 2020). Satisfaction levels of these needs also largely determines students' psychological wellbeing, and the emotions the students experience on the course.

Positive learning emotions, such as curiosity and enthusiasm, support learning and motivation (e.g., Løvoll et al., 2017). Negative ones, like anxiety, weaken learning and elevate drop-out risk in distance studies (Dikmen, 2022; Muis et al., 2015). Nurturing positive learning emotions leads to more effective and deeper learning, and to development of optimal self-regulation and learning strategies (Dunlovsky et al., 2013; Muis et al., 2015). Protecting a positive learning atmosphere is important for motivational completion method design in distance learning.

How engaged the students become in studying on a course, hinges on the course clarity, accessibility and approachability, and the feasibility of its ways of completion. In addition to the learning environment and the course materials, the study schedule determines how much time pressure the students feel. A flexible course schedule helps creating a motivating on-course experience. Taking cognizance to these experiential issues in your course design will likely produce an engaging course experience for students, minimizing the number of dropouts.

Challenges for optimal on-course experience in distance learning

Increased autonomy may mean challenges in delivering the relevant information about the requirements and the related learning goals to the students: written instructions for the course requirements and curriculum can be cumbersome for them to apprehend. Distance learning courses on online platforms easily appear socially faceless and difficult to access.

Online assessment is typically arranged as proctored electronic exams. In addition to the technical infeasibility, electronic exams can awaken anxiety rather than a positive learning experience (Dikmen, 2022), however there are major differences depending mostly on the technological openness in terms of attitudes towards e-exams (Froehlich, 2023). Assessment is traditionally simple grading with minimal informational feedback.

Distance learning allows students with a diverse range of skills and experience to enrol to courses; there is a greater number of students with academic degrees among adult students but also those without any further studies than elementary ones. This poses the challenge of individualizing the optimal study paths for each student. A uniform course design may compromise the optimal learning possibilities, especially for students with the least and the most study capabilities. JYUOpen has alleviated this problem with introductory academic study skill courses for students in acute need of study skill improvement (see case study in chapter 3.2).

The most difficult challenge for distance learning is lack of communality. Students feel socially excluded from other students. Social interaction supports students' learning, motivation, and self-regulation. A course design aiming to enhance study motivation calls for alternative ways of completion.

Course design practices to support study engagement and satisfaction

A clearly structured course with an accessible visual design helps the students to figure out the course curriculum, materials, ways of completion, and assessment. Instructional video lectures by the instructor improve the accessibility of the contents and practices. Justifying the tasks and instructions using the course goals and future skills strengthens the students' experience of the task purpose and significance.

Pre-testing of one's learning is the most effective learning method to enhance study performance levels: frequent testing with continuous feedback and assessment, motivates students and leads to deeper learning (Roediger III et al., 2011). Pre-testing also alleviates test anxiety related to time pressured one-off exams. Students also find completion tasks split into several subtasks more feasible than one-off tasks. The first subtask can be designed the most accessible to get the students invested in the course. Use subtasks also as a tool for goal setting: achievable subgoals motivate students to learn. Use progress monitoring and allow self-monitoring to awaken an experience of competence in learners.

Positive feedback reinforces students' strengths and allows students to feel themselves competent. Mostly, however, students value and benefit from constructive informational assessment and feedback that helps them improve the most effectively (Hsu et al., 2019). This type of assessment works the most naturally as formative assessment in between the course subtasks. Moreover, the language used by the instructor in feedback may either thwart or support students' basic need satisfaction: Feedback is the most effective expressed in the form of acquired mastery of skills to align it with the students' practical interests (Ryan & Deci, 2020). Graded or written formative assessment, or a criterion-based feedback form, can be implemented in this form to protect students' learning motivation. The following assessment practice example from OUC describes how assessment and reassessment can support and improve learning and study experience on and between courses.

The OUUK's Approach to improving retention through assessment[GP15]

Assessment plays a key role in student retention. It both supports and measures learning. The Assessment Programme at The Open University has been working to address the issue of 'single points of failure' as one approach to improving student retention, continuation and performance. Single points of failure are defined as an assessment point which results in an automatic fail for the student if they do not meet the required criteria or mark. This case study presents assessment strategy reviews at The Open University, initiated by the Assessment Programme, that have resulted in changes to assessment policy and processes to ensure that we remain a world-leader in distance education and bring our practice in line with the sector.

Allowing students to feel being in control over their studies most effectively supports students' intrinsic, autonomous learning motivation. For adult students, extended completion time is often crucial because of their simultaneous work and family life. Flexibility in study and task topics or completion methods

enables individualizing the study paths. The most inexperienced students may benefit from additional orienting studies early in the on-course study path. The more experienced students, who wish to advance quickly, can be offered one-off e-exams as a fast lane toward further studies. Adult students could even be trusted to use their personally best mastered methods to present their learning.

A positive and engaging on-course experience includes a chance for interaction between students and instructors or chatbots. Interaction supports study motivation the most efficiently in the beginning of the course. For the more inexperienced students, providing social media platforms for informal learner-learner interaction in the beginning of the course is recommended: students can help each other to learn the course contents, acquire academic skills, and even learn self-regulatory study strategies (e.g., Won et al., 2017). Student interaction can be enhanced among others by Computer supported collaborative learning (CSCL-groups), however the group composition must be considered carefully as higher group diversity on socio-demographic attributes can be significantly negatively related to the structural integration and ultimately to lower grading (Voltmer, 2022). Worth considering is also providing completion methods supporting learner-learner interaction, such as presentations with peer feedback. These can be implemented in live, online – or, to maximize flexibility, even in asynchronous form. The following example from FernUniversität in Hagen describes how social interaction between students and their tutors is key to an inclusive, safe and sustainable study experience.

The FernUniversität's Virtual peer mentoring for students with disabilities or chronic illnesses[GP13]

The Peer Mentoring project is aimed at students with disabilities or chronic illnesses, empowering them during their first semesters at the FernUniversität in Hagen. The specific mentoring provided consists of synchronous meetings – some organised by the programme coordinator and some by the students themselves. It is coordinated by the Department for Equal Opportunities and studyFIT, a unit that combines all extracurricular student support programmes. By bringing together freshmen and students from advanced semesters, the Peer Mentoring project responds to students' need to be connected with fellow students in a distance learning setting. Continuous evaluation indicates that the Peer Mentoring project is the safe space that students with disabilities or chronic illnesses are looking for in order to share very personal matters such as the way the illness or disability impacts their lives and their studies. Both mentees and mentors benefit from participation as both are asked to reflect on how they approach studying and how they deal with the concomitant challenges. A frequently discussed issue is compensation for disadvantages and the question whether or not to disclose the disability or chronic illness. Through the Peer Mentoring project, sustainable communities that outlast the initial semester are built and contact points at the distance learning university are made known. Additionally, by participating in workshops based on their specific needs, students will acquire general study skills which will help them to proceed successfully with their studies, thus lowering dropout rates.

An experience of interaction does not necessarily require active interaction *per se*. The experience can be strengthened by designing interactive forms of instructions, course materials and completion methods. Interestingly, learner-learner or learner-instructor interaction is not the most significant form of interaction for course satisfaction but the learner-content interaction, meaning students' inner discussion

with the course material and themselves (Kuo et al., 2014). Completion methods supporting an interactional approach toward the course material, such as interactional lecture videos, or other electronic course materials with testing of learning using quizzes. Using an interactional approach is an effective tool of guidance and supervision to help students focus on the most relevant contents in textbooks or other materials.

Feedback on the used practices

Implementing these practices can have significant effects not only on the learning performance and the student retention levels of a distance learning institution, but also on its economy. Based on unpublished data collected by JYUOpen, on single courses, the course completion levels can rise by 30%. However, there are no systematic data to ascertain what proportion of the increase can be attributed to these practices, as rigorous studies of the practice impacts are challenging in distance learning (Woodley & Simpson, 2018).

In their feedback on distance courses, students have praised the presented practices; especially subtasks, pre-testing of learning, as well as constructive, informational feedback. Once a student has invested some time and effort to course completion, they are less likely to drop out. Advanced adult students have especially wished for flexibility in study time, contents, assignments, and completion methods. Novice students, in turn, have wished for sufficient interaction with the instructor and other students.

Progression

This part of the student journey can be final or iterative. That is, it can represent completion of the student journey, or a stage towards full completion. In the former, students might exit the organisation having achieved their qualification aim. If their experience has been good and they seek higher level qualification or new skills in the future, they may return so keeping contact with alumni through some kind of association can be beneficial to both parties. It also presents the opportunity to recruit graduates to further study opportunity by offering discounts or bursaries.

In the latter, the stages referred to might be from module to module at a single level, or from level to level (e.g. first to second cycle). This point in the journey has two key risks for retention. One relates to a lack of available information about options for progression and advice on decision-making. For example, a student may have decided to take a study break and in so doing fall out of the university support network, making it less likely they will return. Universities need to ensure there are mechanisms in place to keep contact and remind students where they can go for advice and guidance on the options available to them and what these might entail.

Those wishing to progress immediately may fall in to one of two groups – those who have successfully completed their module(s) and those who may need to be re-assessed. Struggles with assessment are common reasons for dropout and offering re-sits and re-submissions can help but students need support

to see where they went wrong and how they might put this right. Providing one to one tutorials, drop-in sessions or assessment workshops can all be useful if students are aware of and know where to find them.

The OUUK's Approach to improving retention through assessment [GP15]

Assessment plays a key role in student retention. It both supports and measures learning. The Assessment Programme at The Open University has been working to address the issue of 'single points of failure' as one approach to improving student retention, continuation and performance. Single points of failure are defined as an assessment point which results in an automatic fail for the student if they do not meet the required criteria or mark. This case study presents assessment strategy reviews at The Open University, initiated by the Assessment Programme, that have resulted in changes to assessment policy and processes to ensure that we remain a world-leader in distance education and bring our practice in line with the sector.

The FernUniversität's Study workshops within the Bachelor of Laws degree programme [GP16]

The study workshops "In iure" are aimed at students who either did not pass or did not attend the examinations in the first modules of the Bachelor of Laws. It is an innovative holistic approach and consists of asynchronous and synchronous formats addressing both subject-related competences as well as general study skills. The participants learn foundational techniques which are not only required for the course in Civil Law, but are also the basis for a successful career in every legal field. The positive impact that the workshops have on both the students' overall achievement and on other measures of student satisfaction is shown by the outcomes of subsequent assessments and also from student feedback.

Sometimes, students may disappear from view having achieved some credit but without meeting their learning goals. Being able to recognise success, rather than seeing this as failure, can be very empowering for students and may encourage them to return to study, as this case study from OUUK shows.

Recognising the Success of all Students: The OUUK's Approach [GP1]

Supporting students to succeed in their goals is at the heart of all Higher Education providers. Distance Learning students face an increasing number of priorities that conflict with their study meaning that they often need to withdraw from their studies before achieving their intended qualification. Whilst they may have ceased to study before achieving their final goal, they may have achieved sufficient credit for a lower qualification. However, not all students inform their provider they are permanently withdrawing, as they may not return from a study break or reregister after successfully achieving credit. In these cases, Higher Education providers should ensure institutional processes are in place that recognise the success of their students upon ceasing to study by awarding exit milestone qualifications to students who leave with sufficient credit.

Universities are often measured on the progression of their students to employment or further study. Although not specifically intended to improve retention, preparing students for employment and helping them to find opportunities can increase their satisfaction and motivate them to stay the course.

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Concluding remarks

George Ubachs (EADTU)

Concluding remarks

This report, prepared by and for EADTU members, aims to identify some of the factors which can lead to students in ODL leaving early as well as approaches which members have adopted in response. In this respect we explored the ongoing challenges associated with student retention and approaches used in distance and online learning environments.

The need to establish common frameworks and clear definitions has a high institutional priority. Dropping out is a problem for students as well as institutions as it impacts not only the learners' educational achievements but also the reputation and financial stability of the institutions since retention, dropout, success or withdrawal rates are often associated with the quality accreditation of the university and its programmes.

It is therefore of utmost importance to address retention and share expertise and experiences between ODL universities to improve student engagement and retention.

Factors that influence student retention are categorized in this report under internal, external, student-specific, and institutional factors. These range from academic preparation and engagement to personal circumstances and the quality of institutional support. Distance learning universities face in this respect a unique dilemma. The flexibility intended to accommodate diverse student needs can also contribute to dropout rates when it leads to excessive choice or insufficient structure, suggesting a need for a balanced approach.

External pressures such as financial distress, family responsibilities, and employment demands can further significantly affect student persistence, especially among adult learners who constitute a large portion of the ODL student body. It has to be stressed that institutions must evolve to meet the changing needs of this diverse student population, suggesting a shift away from traditional models towards enhancing student support and utilizing data to guide interventions.

Also the examples used in this report from various ODL universities show the nature and complexity of responding to students' needs and challenges that cause dropout. At every stage of the student life-cycle, it is important to ensure that clear, accurate and relevant information is fully accessible, easy to navigate and provided at the point of need. Digital tools facilitate this but there should always be space for human intervention. Together, these points underscore the multifaceted nature of student retention in ODL, requiring comprehensive, nuanced approaches to address the diverse needs and challenges facing students and institutions in this sector.

Moreover, the discussion calls for a consensus on definitions related to retention and collective approach to tackle retention issues in ODL.

Further research and adaptive strategies are needed to more effectively address retention in ODL. This may include the development of new theoretical models that better reflect the unique characteristics of online and distance learners, aiming to provide more targeted and effective support. By sharing strategies and best practices, institutions can enhance student engagement and success, which could lead to improved retention rates.

Annex I: Good Practices √

Good Practice #1

Recognising the Success of all Students

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Supporting students to succeed in their goals is at the heart of all Higher Education providers. Distance Learning students face an increasing number of priorities that conflict with their study meaning that they often need to withdraw from their studies before achieving their intended qualification. Whilst they may have ceased to study before achieving their final goal, they may have achieved sufficient credit for a lower qualification. However, not all students inform their provider they are permanently withdrawing, as they may not return from a study break or reregister after successfully achieving credit. In these cases, Higher Education providers should ensure institutional processes are in place that recognise the success of their students upon ceasing to study by awarding exit milestone qualifications to students who leave with sufficient credit.

Introduction

As a distance learning, open entry institution, The Open University is unique in the UK. Many students study alongside additional responsibilities, such as employment and childcare; students have to be able to find the balance between study and personal responsibilities. Sometimes this is a difficult balance to find, and students may withdraw from their studies before achieving their ultimate goal. The Open University has recently reviewed its academic regulations and awarding processes to ensure that all students with sufficient credit have their success recognised.

Challenges

At Open universities students are often considered to not leave the university as the 'door' is always open for them to return, either on their journey towards a qualification, or to return to higher study such as postgraduate Masters. As students face conflicting priorities on their time they often cease or pause their studies but do not always inform their provider. Often a student will cease their journey after successfully completing one or more modules and just not re-register. In this case providers often make assumptions about student goals and assume they have been met via credit accumulation or that the student is just taking a study break. This assumption means that conversations do not take place between students and the provider meaning students are often not aware that they may be eligible to take a 'lower' qualification, such as an Undergraduate Certificate or diploma, instead of their original goal of an Undergraduate degree.

This has several implications for students and the provider:

- Students themselves do not recognise or understand their own achievements.
- Students can often feel like they failed by not having succeeded in their original goal.
- Qualification completion or success rates for providers often look lower in official statistics.

Approach

The Open University (UK) realised that making assumptions about student goals and study journey meant students were not always receiving recognition for their success and this was negatively impacting on the University's qualification metrics as measured by their regulator. In 2023, the University began a project to make certain that the appropriate institutional practices and processes were in place to ensure that when students ceased to study with sufficient credit that they received the appropriate qualification.

The PVC Students Office facilitated a collaborative project between data teams and the University's qualification awarding teams. This project used the 2016/17 cohort, those students who began their studies during the 2016/17 academic year, as a pilot to understand how systems and approaches could be developed to recognise the success of all students.

Activities:

- The Data teams identified students who originally declared the intention to study for a degree and had ceased to study in recent years but with sufficient credit to receive a lower qualification. A definition of 'ceasing to study' was agreed as part of the project: a student who had not studied for two or more years and was not registered to study in any future academic years.
- The awarding teams, Academic Credit and Qualifications team, who had responsibility for awarding qualifications checked the student records and identified the highest qualification for which the student was eligible. This was either a named qualification such as a certificate or diploma in a specific subject or an Open qualification. The Open University offers students the opportunity to gain a qualification via accumulation of credit from a mix of different subjects.

Communications: The identified students were contacted via email informing them of their eligibility and providing them a linked form to respond with one of three options:

- To decline the qualification; the form gave the option for the student to state they wished to receive no further contact from the University.
- To accept the qualification or choose a qualification if they were eligible for more than one.
- To talk to an advisor for advice on returning to study.

Students received two emails four weeks apart. Students were required to respond in order to be awarded the qualification.

Results:

- Approximately 2,400 students were identified from the 2016/17 cohort as having ceased to study but with sufficient credit to receive a lower qualification.
- As a result of the communications approximately 25% of students requested a qualification; a total of 580 qualifications have been awarded between April 2023 and April 2024.
- Of the 2,400 students contacted 147 have re-registered with the Open University to continue their journey as a result of the email.
- The number of qualifications awarded equates to a possible 1.7% uplift in the Open University's qualification completion rates as measured by their regulator.

- Feedback has been received from students which shows the overwhelming positive impact on students themselves, students have spoken about how the communications and resulting qualification has given them a sense of achievement.

Next Steps: The learnings from the pilot have now been handed over to a team within the University's student support area to embed the approach within standard practices. A second pilot is running between Spring 2024 and Summer 2024. Phase 1 will work to award qualifications to students who started their studies in the 2017/18 academic year and phase 2 will look to award qualifications to students who started their studies in any year between 2018/19 and 2021/22. From Autumn 2025 the pilot processes will become embedded in standard OU processes and qualifications will be awarded to students on an ongoing basis as they 'cease to study'.

Outcomes

The pilot has proven to be a great success; it has helped the Open University improve its qualification completion metrics whilst supporting students to gain a positive outcome from their studies. Receiving a recognised qualification for their study may help students progress to different employment or return to their studies either with their current or different provider. Embedding this work into normal practice will ensure more students have a positive exit from their studies. More importantly, recognising a success that is different to that of the student's original goal helps those who may have felt they had failed, recognise their own successes and support an increase in their confidence and motivation.

Good Practice #2

Diversity and educational goals: Initiating a certificate study programme as a type of micro-degree

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In order to make the attainment of educational goals more transparent and to provide students, who in many cases are employed, with evidence of the structured skills they have acquired, the introduction of a certificate programme is a sensible addition to the array of courses offered. Using Psychology as an example, we provide an insight into a certificate programme with different specialisations. In this context, we also present the first results of the reporting and the central student surveys.

Introduction

If students do not wish to or are not able to complete an entire Bachelor's or Master's degree, the FernUniversität in Hagen offers an alternative study option: the certificate study programme. It enables students to achieve individual educational goals below the level of an entire course of study. The certificate will provide them with proof of a qualification at university level. It consists of thematically related modules from the regular degree programmes and typically has a scope of 60 ECTS credits (as part of a Bachelor's degree programme) or 30 ECTS credits (as part of a Master's degree programme).

Challenges

Of the more than 70,000 students enrolled at the FernUniversität, over 75 percent are in employment and more than half have already attained a first degree. On average, students are 39 years old. The FernUniversität has always embraced and valued the diversity that students bring with them with their different life paths, educational backgrounds and work experiences. This non-traditional student body therefore has very different educational goals – including qualifications that do not lead to a full degree. In order to better meet this diversity of educational goals, the FernUniversität has responded by increasing the rigor of its array of courses and differentiating its course structure through the introduction of a certificate programme.

As part of the design of the certificate programme, the requirement arose to explore thematically related modules for the certificates in order to give the certificate programme a better structure from a didactic point of view and to address the educational goals of the students in a more interest-oriented manner. In terms of the certificates' ECTS range, these are on par not so much with the increasingly discussed micro-credential courses, but rather with a type of micro-degree.

By anchoring the certificates in undergraduate and graduate degree programmes, the quality assurance requirements are also taken into account. The modules taught in the certificate programme are already quality-assured via the usual accreditation procedures. However, the inclusion of the certificate programme in the regular degree programmes means that prospective students must also meet the admission requirements for the respective degree programmes.

Approaches

Target groups

The certificate programme aims at different target groups:

- Prospective students with individual educational goals below a full degree;
- Students interested in specialist studies who (initially) want to refresh their knowledge and skills or enter academic education for the first time within a manageable framework;
- Students who, for various reasons, do not (or can no longer) complete their studies (a qualified dropout scenario).

With regard to these target groups, very different educational goals are fulfilled (e.g. Bozick et al., 2021). The certificate programme offers a more manageable entry into academic education, an independent educational goal and a motivating intermediate degree (permeability, stackability). However, it also offers students who have difficulties or are unable to meet the demands of their studies due to work and family commitments a qualified perspective for leaving university. If students decide to ex-matriculate (i.e. deregister) after obtaining a certificate, they will have nevertheless acquired a certificate that can serve as a clear marker of career-specific skills (and thus cannot be classified as a mere collection of individual achievements by a dropout).

Structure and organisation

The faculties have integrated the certificate programme into some regular degree programmes; the prerequisite for completing the certificates is therefore a valid university entrance qualification. The undergraduate Bachelor's degree programme has three parts – introductory, specialisation and final modules – that build on each other. After completing certain modules, usually totalling 60 ECTS, students can already be awarded a specialist certificate in many Bachelor's degree programmes. In addition, the Faculty of Business Administration and Economics has established a certificate in the consecutive Master's programme, which is issued after the completion of modules with a total of 30 ECTS.

For the purpose of determining a student's educational goals, students are asked about their primary study objectives at enrolment and at each re-registration. This allows conclusions to be drawn as to which components of the certificate they intend to utilise (e.g. individual educational goals below a Bachelor's degree, low-threshold entry into academic education, qualified exit from studies or credits en route to a Bachelor's degree). In order to improve the database, a standardised procedure is required across all faculties. However, a data-driven view of such qualifications is required in order to systematically evaluate the implications. For this reason, the central reporting and surveys were supplemented with regard to the certificate programme. In addition, the certificates issued are recorded so that the university can track whether students continue their studies in the regular degree programme or leave the university after receiving their certificate.

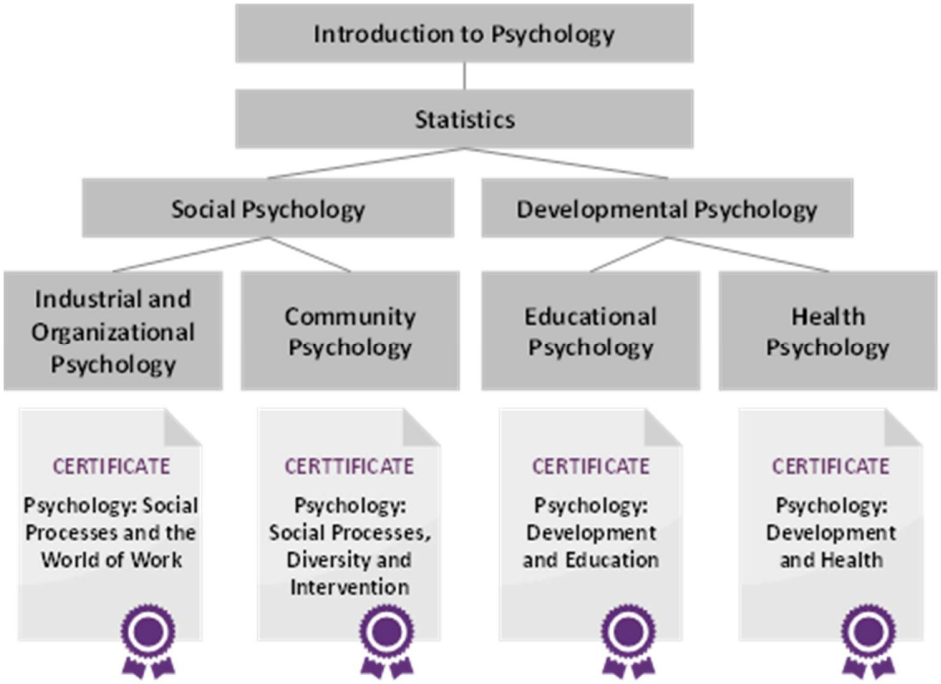
Example of Psychology as one of the most popular study program

Let us take the certificate programme in the Bachelor of Science in Psychology as an example (for a general overview of the BA degree programme, see cf. Stürmer et al., 2018). This degree is in high demand and was one of the first to implement the certificate programme, and thus it has yielded much evidence on the workings of the newly implemented system. Since the winter semester of 2020/2021, the Faculty of

Psychology has been offering an alternative to the entire Bachelor's degree programme. This is useful, for example, if personal interests or professional requirements are limited to a specific field of Psychology. Students can obtain a certificate in the following areas of Psychology after successfully completing the necessary foundation and specialisation modules:

- Psychology: Social Processes and the World of Work
- Psychology: Social Processes, Diversity and Intervention
- Psychology: Development and Education
- Psychology: Development and Health

The certificates can be completed within a minimum of three semesters. The following diagram shows the structure of the certificate programme and the underlying module combinations (one module has a scope of 15 ECTS).



Outcomes

Here are some initial results using Psychology as an example (Data sources: Internal student and exam statistics and baseline survey of incoming psychology students). In the winter semester of 2023/2024, out of a total of 11,570 students enrolled in the BSc Psychology programme, about 9 percent stated that they were aiming for a certificate, which means that 91 percent of the students were aiming for a Bachelor's degree. Students pursuing a certificate tend to be older and are more likely to be studying part-time due to a higher level of employment. They are also, on average, in a higher semester of study, have a higher level of education (often a degree) and have more work experience overall.
The certificate programme in Psychology appeals to a variety of audiences:

- Students with individual educational goals below a professional qualification: 21 percent of the students surveyed would like to expand their knowledge in a specific area of Psychology for professional reasons.
- Students who would like to enter academic education for the first time within a manageable framework (combined with a certificate as a motivating intermediate degree): For 28 percent of the students surveyed, the certificate is an intermediate goal en route to a Bachelor's degree.
- Students who, for a variety of reasons, are unwilling or unable to complete their studies (qualified dropouts): About 20 to 25 percent of students drop out after receiving the certificate.

Survey results also show that more than 80 percent of certificate students are employed. About 40 percent of them work in health care, social work, teaching and education. In contrast, about 20 percent work in a business organisation, accounting, law and administration. Accordingly, a large number of certificates are issued in the fields of 'Development and Health' (31 percent of certificates issued) and 'Social Processes and the World of Work' (40 percent of certificates issued). The other thematic focuses have comparatively lower shares of the total number of certificates issued ('Development and Education': 12 percent; 'Social Processes, Diversity and Intervention': 17 percent). Since the introduction of the certificate programme in Psychology in the winter semester of 2020/2021, 863 certificates have been issued (as of 15/11/2023).

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Good Practice #3

Many Shades of Flexibility: Use Cases of a Giga Open and Distance Learning University

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Anadolu University, a premier Giga open and distance learning institution in Türkiye, has adopted an innovative flexibility-oriented approach to improve student retention and reduce dropout rates. This case study examines the university's strategic use of flexibility across various dimensions—pedagogical, curricular, temporal, spatial, technological, communicational, financial, and accessibility—to address the diverse needs of its expansive student population. By integrating these various shades of flexibility, Anadolu University not only enhances the educational experience for its students but also significantly contributes to increased retention rates and reduced dropout occurrences, demonstrating the effectiveness of a holistic approach to flexibility in education.

Introduction

Inspired by the concept of openness in education, which encompasses attributes such as access, flexibility, equity, collaboration, agency, democratization, social justice, transparency, and the elimination of barriers (Zawacki-Richter et al., 2020), Anadolu University has integrated openness as a foundational value. This commitment to openness reflects the university's dedication to enhancing educational accessibility and quality for a diverse local and global student body.

Anadolu University, established in 1958 as a state university in Türkiye, embarked on a transformative journey in 1982 by adopting open and distance learning (ODL) methodologies. This strategic shift enabled the university to function as a dual-mode institution, catering to the educational needs of both on-campus and remote learners (Aydın et al., 2023). The adoption of ODL was driven by a principal objective: to ensure educational equality and create a learning ecosystem with different entry and exit points. Anchoring this initiative was the philosophy of openness, which has since become central to the university's operational ethos. Anadolu University envisions itself as a global leader in lifelong learning, a vision that highlights its commitment to openness and educational innovation.

As a testament to its expansive reach and impact, Anadolu University is recognized as a "Giga university," boasting a student population exceeding 1 million each term and more than 2 million students in an academic year. This distinction not only makes it the largest university in Türkiye and Europe by enrollment numbers but also positions it among the world's most significant educational institutions in terms of student numbers (Bozkurt, 2019). Situated in Eskişehir, Türkiye, the university extends its educational services beyond national borders, delivering programs in over 40 countries worldwide. This global operational scope illustrates Anadolu University's commitment to its foundational value of openness, fostering educational opportunities that transcend geographical and socioeconomic barriers.

State of the Art

As a pivotal institution in Türkiye's higher education landscape, Anadolu University plays a significant role, catering to millions of learners and comprising nearly half of the country's higher education student body (Council of Higher Education [CoHE], 2023). This massive scale of operation necessitates the adoption of diverse strategies and the provision of various services to deliver effective, efficient, and engaging learning experiences. Despite these efforts, the vastness of Anadolu University's educational system inherently presents challenges, notably in terms of student dropout and retention rates.

To address these challenges, Anadolu University emphasizes the principle of flexibility, around which it has developed a comprehensive array of options aimed at mitigating dropout rates and enhancing student retention. This approach acknowledges the diverse needs and circumstances of its extensive student body, offering tailored solutions that cater to individual learning preferences, schedules, and life commitments. By prioritizing flexibility in its educational offerings and support services, Anadolu University seeks to create an environment that not only attracts learners from various backgrounds but also supports them throughout their educational journey, thereby increasing their likelihood of success and retention.

Shades of the Flexibility

The concept of flexibility at Anadolu University manifests through a variety of implementations, practices, and strategies, each designed to accommodate the diverse needs of its student population. These approaches can be metaphorically described as different "shades" of flexibility, each offering unique benefits and addressing specific aspects of the learning experience. Here are some of the key shades of flexibility at Anadolu University:

Pedagogical Flexibility

The university adopts diverse teaching methodologies and learning approaches to cater to different learning styles and preferences. This includes a mix of synchronous and synchronous delivery methods. All the learning content is prepared as self-study materials and learner support is given through different channels. Besides, in addition to formal learning materials, Anadolu University provides opportunities to join Learning Communities (e.g., art, science, ICT, etc.) so that we can support the sense of community at our best.

Curricular Flexibility

This flexibility allows students to create their own learning scenorişas or customize their learning paths according to their career goals, interests, and time constraints. Curricular flexibility may include options for elective courses and modular course structures.

Students can retake the courses they have already passed in order to improve their grades. They can choose only one course or a maximum of 10 courses in a semester and determine their program according to their own schedule. They may interrupt their studies at any time and their enrollment will be deleted only if they do not enroll for four successive semesters. If he/she takes a break for one, two, or three semesters other than four consecutive semesters, he/she can return to the program at any time. If a

student decides not to complete his/her bachelor's degree and has enough credits, he/she can receive an associate's degree from an equivalent department.

Temporal Flexibility

Recognizing the varying time commitments and schedules of its students, Anadolu University offers asynchronous learning options (synchronous options are also available) and self-paced courses. This ensures that education is accessible to students who may be balancing work, family, or other responsibilities alongside their studies.

Spatial Flexibility

Through its robust online and distance learning platforms, the university transcends geographical boundaries, enabling students to access quality education regardless of their physical location. This is particularly beneficial for international students and those residing in remote or rural areas. Besides, students also have the possibility to take proctored exams in the cities of their choice, in the locations of their choice. Additionally, students can shift the type of enrollment (e.g., local vs global enrollment) and keep on their programs even if they move to another country. Besides, proctored exams can also take place at home, rather than in test centres, depending on students' disabilities or special learning needs.

Technological Flexibility

Embracing the latest in educational technology, Anadolu University provides a variety of digital tools and platforms that support interactive learning, digital assessments, and virtual collaboration. This approach ensures that learning can continue uninterrupted, even in the face of challenges such as those posed by global health crises (e.g., COVID-19 or natural disasters such as earthquakes). Anadolu University also provides low-tech learning materials (e.g., printed books) in addition to high-tech materials (interactive learning materials). Such a strategy minimizes the gap occurring due to the digital divide.

Communicational Flexibility

Anadolu University provides multiple communication channels to ensure communication is possible anytime uninterrupted as long as students want to reach out us. During working hours at Anadolu University, students can reach the call center; they can communicate 24/7 via ChatBots and find solutions to their problems; they can receive individualized answers specific to their situation through the request form in the support system. In addition, Anadolu University announces all important announcements to millions of students via SMS and Smart Phone App and shares current announcements on different social media channels and interacts with students.

Financial Flexibility

Understanding the financial barriers that can impede access to higher education, Anadolu University offers affordable and flexible payment options to ensure that financial constraints do not prevent students from pursuing their educational aspirations. These include requesting payment only for student affairs, not delivery for educational content. Besides, learners with special needs (e.g., Students with a disability over 40%; n=26000) do not pay anything. Likewise, Anadolu University adopts an inclusive policy and does not

demand any payments from its student body that is affected by different crises as the latest Earthquakes in Turkey (n=213.000).

Accessibility Flexibility

This aspect focuses on making education accessible to all students, including those with disabilities and special learning needs. Implementations may include adaptive learning materials, accessible course designs, and support services tailored to meet the needs of students requiring additional assistance. For proctored exams, specialized staff are assigned according to the student's disability or specific learning needs and provide support during the exam to meet the needs of that student only. Besides, then learning management systems adopt universal design principles.

Conclusion

The main purpose of the flexibility-oriented practices implemented by Anadolu University is to increase the retention rate and reduce the dropout rate by meeting the needs of the learners and increasing their motivation.

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Good Practice #4

Data informed Priorities

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Supporting students to succeed in their goals is at the heart of all Higher Education providers. Yet in recent years, particularly since the COVID pandemic, part time distance learning students have faced an increasing number of priorities that conflict with their study. The question that faces Higher Education providers is how to better support students without overwhelming them with additional tasks or activities that add to their time pressures. Data insight can provide part of the answer to support providers in understanding how and where they should focus their and their students' energies to gain the greatest impact on success.

Introduction

As a distance learning, open entry institution, The Open University is unique in the UK. Many students study alongside additional responsibilities, such as employability and childcare, and are often returning to study after a prolonged period of time. At the Open University our data capabilities and understanding of student behaviour and needs has significantly increased in recent years. We are using this knowledge alongside technological advances to offer a more personalised study experience to our students and respond to changes in student needs, demographic trends, technological advances, funding streams and wider societal developments. Rich data is captured from our Virtual Learning Environment regarding student behaviour which is beginning to be used to provide students with a more tailored teaching and learning experience. The insight captured from these rich data sources are now helping the Open University (UK) to understand how it can have the greatest impact on student success.

Challenges

The Open University is becoming data rich, sometimes there is almost 'too much' data. We need to learn how to use the data to provide actionable insight that informs our practice and priorities; our actions need to be evidence based. Alongside this we need to ensure that our staff understand the context and importantly insight that comes from the data, so they understand the appropriate action to take and support the approaches.

Approaches

Data informing programmes and strategic direction

Evidenced based action was a core principle of the PVC Students Office upon its creation in 2019. At the same time the University invested heavily in its Data capabilities. The creation of a Strategic Analytics team moved the University from data reporting to actionable insight. The Strategic Analytics team began to work alongside specific programmes within the PVC Students Office, such as our Assessment

Programme to produce insight and recommendations, which began to inform recommendations, actions and changes to policy.

In 2022 the University created the Student Outcomes Portfolio, co-ordinated by the PVC Students Office, which holds responsibility for the improvement of student outcomes specifically those of continuation of study and completion of a qualification as measured by the English Higher Education regulator, the Office for Students. The portfolio began working with the Strategic Analytics team to understand data insight and the behaviour of our students. Over a period of 18 months the Strategic Analytics team presented insight into continuation of study and qualification completion rates. This work led to development of the metrics hierarchy. This metrics hierarchy showed the correlation between certain stages of the student journey; providing a tool to explain the interrelationship between different metrics and understand the drivers of success.

Through this metrics hierarchy and insight from other projects a common theme appeared, the importance of early engagement in student success. The Student Outcomes Portfolio and the wider PVC Students Office questioned what the insight meant for our practice and worked with the Analytics team to bring this insight together to understand its importance to university priorities.

Data Informed Priorities

The data and student insight showed the following information about OU student behaviours:

- Students who engaged with the OU's Virtual Learning Environment before their module started had a stronger chance of passing their module. The metrics hierarchy showed a correlation of 0.75.
- Analysis of results in a particular academic year showed that just 6.6% of students who did not submit their first assignment went on to pass their first module i.e. approximately 93% of students who did not submit their first assignment failed to complete their module. The metrics hierarchy also showed a strong correlation between submission of the first assignment and module pass. We've learnt that for every 1%pt increase in first assignment submission rates an additional 0.6%pt of student are expected to pass their module.
- The proportion of students returning to study another module strongly correlated to module pass rates. For every 1%pt increase in module pass rates an additional 0.5%pt uplift should be seen in the proportion of students who return to study.

This insight helped the University understand that in order to have the largest impact on the success of our students we should focus our priorities on the first module studied and specifically on supporting students between registration to successful submission of their first assignment.

From Insight to Action

In preparation for the 2023/24 academic year the PVC Students Office brought together the insight from each of its individual programmes and the Student Outcomes Portfolio. In reflecting on the insight, the Student Outcomes Portfolio asked the University to prioritise activity on OU Level 1 (UK, level 4) modules. This priority was shared with units across the University through the Unit business planning process and

through stakeholder engagement channels. Early insight data into student performance for 2023/24 is showing green shoots of improvement.

The Student Outcomes Portfolio has continued to embrace the insight by changing it structure to include a Readiness to study Pillar through which it supports the introduction of an induction programme for all new level 1 students to, amongst other priorities, drive up student engagement in the VLE. In January 2024 the Portfolio co-ordinated a Level One Workshop where key stakeholders from across the University received insight into why early engagement and first assignment submission is so important to Student Success. Attendees shared examples of activities they have implemented to improve student success up to first assignment submission. The workshop made a set of recommendations that are being shared with faculties and units for implementation in 2024/25.

The three core activities recommended as a priority for 24/25 are:

- Support early engagement in Study and the VLE with all new students having the opportunity to take part in the OU Ready induction programme.
- To support better submission of first assignment, all Level 1 Students should receive support to ensure they have the skills and time required to submit their first assignment. This support should be in addition to traditional support offered via delivery of module content.
- All Level 1 students who do not submit their first assignment should be offered a 'lifeline' to enable them to submit past the original deadline.

The recommendations are deliberately written at a high level to enable faculties to implement the recommendations in the best way for their subject areas, but example activities are shared with staff to help with implementation. The recommendations have been communicated to staff and shared via a website that highlights examples of good practice.

Outcomes

At the time of writing, March 2024, the full impact of this data driven priority has yet to be seen. However, the University has clearly understood the message with staff embracing the importance of early success and the prioritisation of Level 1 and submission of the first assignment. A key aspect to the success of the Level 1 priority has been that clear messaging has been supported by understandable data evidence. Being able to evidence the story of how certain student behaviour correlates to success and provide staff with a clear window in the student journey in which to focus has galvanised the staff and early indications show they are beginning to positively impact student success.

Good Practice #5

The Early Alert Indicators Dashboard

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The Early Alert Indicators Dashboard (EAID) is a Predictive Learning Analytics tool in which Machine Learning methods are applied for the early identification of students at risk. Tutors receive weekly alerts based on predictive data, which enables them to make timely interventions. World-class research with large-scale studies shows that where tutors regularly use the system, students have 7-8% higher chances of passing the course, reaching 10% for underrepresented groups. The EAID supports a student population of more than 200,000 students, making it one of the largest implementations of Predictive Learning Analytics globally and changing the way online teachers help students, especially those who face difficulties, towards success.

Introduction

The Open University (OU), a pioneer in distance education, has faced the unique challenge of improving student retention and performance in a remote learning environment with over 200,000 students worldwide. The institution's commitment to facilitating lifelong learning and promoting social justice led to the development of a groundbreaking project that is significantly impacting student outcomes.

The OU's Early Alert Indicators Dashboard (EAID) was conceived to identify struggling students and provide timely support. With 208,308 remote learners, face-to-face interactions are limited, making it imperative to proactively address challenges to minimise dropout rates.

Early research into student retention showed that when students did not submit their first assignment, their probability of not completing the course was almost 90% (Herodotou et al., 2019). Waiting for the students to submit their first assignment to identify which ones may need additional support is therefore too late. Timely interventions are crucial to provide students with the necessary support, maximising their opportunities for success in their studies. Recognising the urgency of early intervention, The OU embarked in 2011 on a continuous cycle of research, development, and socio-technical integration, embedding the use of the EAID into teaching practices.

The EAID is a sophisticated system that produces weekly predictions, estimating whether students will submit their next assignment (Herodotou et al., 2019), as well as predictions on whether students are likely to complete and pass the course (Calvert, 2014). This involves analysing diverse sources of data, including student demographics, Virtual Learning Environment engagement, assessment data, and insights from previous course presentations. The automation of student predictions is made through hundreds of weekly-generated Machine Learning models, with transparent justifications, ensuring swift and accurate weekly insights into students' progression.

These predictions are disseminated to tutors, module teams, student support teams, and other pertinent university stakeholders through an easy-to-use dashboard. This comprehensive tool provides users with

weekly updates on their students, encompassing details about their engagement in the Virtual Learning Environment, last login timestamps, tutorial attendance, and other pertinent monitoring information. The dashboard also provides insights into trends, offering a longitudinal view of how retention rates evolve over weeks.

However, the dashboard's focal point lies in its predictive capabilities, represented by a colour-coded system akin to traffic lights. Red indicates students predicted to either not submit or not achieve a passing score, amber signals a prediction of submission with a potential shortfall in the minimum passing score, and green signifies a prediction of both submission and success. This intuitive metaphor allows tutors to swiftly identify students currently at risk.

Supplementing this key feature are additional functionalities such as robust filtering mechanisms, enabling educators and stakeholders to zoom into specific student cohorts. This is particularly useful in the context of the Open University, where a module can have thousands of students. The dashboard also incorporates a tutor notebook, facilitating the recording of interventions. This wealth of information aids ongoing exploration into the effectiveness of interventions for different students and within specific contexts.

Extensive pilot programs and world-class research underscored the project's efficacy. With more than 35 scientific publications in the top scientific journals and conferences of the Learning Analytics field[1]. Key findings revealed that teachers utilising the EAID significantly influenced student completion and passing rates, with students having between 7-8% higher chances of passing the course, reaching to 10% for underrepresented students, and those from low socioeconomic backgrounds (Hlosta et al., 2021).

The Open University (OU) has adopted a university-wide integration of the dashboard, a move championed by our Vice Chancellor who actively encourages educators to embrace this transformative technology. Complementing this initiative is a dedicated support team that provides teachers with ongoing assistance through tailored training sessions, daily support services, and a comprehensive array of resources including a website, instructional videos, and pertinent documentation.

The advantages of this integration have been underscored both formally, through rigorous research studies (Herodotou et al., 2023), and informally, as expressed by educators who view the EAID as a valuable tool for refining their teaching methods and maintaining a proactive approach to understanding their students' progress in remote learning environments. “I had a difficult group this year and without having OU Analyse, I think I would have lost around 4-5 of them but all of them made it till the end and passed”
International awards and nominations[2] acknowledged the OU's pioneering efforts in predictive analytics, highlighting the institution's significant strides in enhancing student learning on a large scale. Importantly, the project adheres to strict ethical guidelines (Rets et al., 2023), emphasising the importance of co-creating technology with teachers to ensure widespread adoption.

The EAID stands out as one of the few systems rigorously tested, applied, and proven through systematic evaluation to enhance student learning at scale. The success of this initiative not only underscores the importance of a dual focus on technological innovation and social integration but also serves as a catalyst for broader developments at The Open University. As the OU continues to embed technology into

educational practices, the lessons learned emphasise the need for ongoing support at all organisational levels and a holistic approach that values both technical and social dimensions for successful integration.

Challenges

This good practice addresses the challenges of: (i) student retention and, (ii) reduction of awarding gaps.

Approaches

Our approach entails seamlessly integrating the EAID across the institution, addressing both technical and social challenges. Technically, the project follows a continuous cycle of research, development, and evaluation to ensure accurate and fair predictions for all students, as well as secure and ethical data management practices. User feedback is actively incorporated for optimal support of teaching practices. Socially, the tool's adoption is supported by senior leadership, ongoing training, user support, and the involvement of tutor champions across schools and faculties, facilitating widespread acceptance.

Outcomes

The frequent use of the EAID by educators significantly influences student completion and passing rates, with students having between 7-8% higher chances of passing the course, reaching to 10% for underrepresented students, and those from low socioeconomic backgrounds (Hlosta et al., 2021).

References

[0] Details about the EAID project (also known as OU Analyse) can be found at https://analyse.kmi.open.ac.uk/

[1] The list of publications providing the evidence behind the effectiveness of the project can be found at https://analyse.kmi.open.ac.uk/#publications

[2] Past and present awards obtained by the project can be found at: https://analyse.kmi.open.ac.uk/#media

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Good Practice #6

StudyNAVI – a guidance tool for prospective students

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In line with the target agreement to provide all prospective students with the opportunity to complete an online self-assessment (OSA) before starting their studies, as outlined in the Higher Education Development Plan of 2020, the FURIOSA project (**F**ern**u**niversitäres **R**essourcen- und **I**nteressen-**O**nline-**S**elf-**A**ssessment) was initiated in early 2021. In the course of this project, the university-wide OSA studyNAVI was developed for prospective students. It shall help identify potential disparities in resources, interests, and expectations that may counteract the success of distance learning and provide recommendations for counselling and support services offered by FernUniversität in Hagen.

StudyNAVI has been available online since May 2022 and currently (January 2024) has over 3600 participants. Initial evaluations indicate that studyNAVI meets the set objectives and could thus prove to be another successful measure to foster academic success of distance learners.

Introduction

Flexibility, both in terms of location and time, good planning, and the ability to balance family and work life represent only a few of the advantages associated with distance learning at FernUniversität in Hagen. These aspects enable distance learners to adapt their studies to fit their work and personal life. Therefore, students at FernUniversität in Hagen often have different backgrounds compared to those at traditional universities. However, despite or perhaps due to this flexibility, distance learning poses unique challenges and hurdles that may be distinct from those face-to-face studies.

Challenges

With its adaptability to students' life situations, studying at FernUniversität in Hagen has apparent advantages. Nevertheless, prospective students often have doubts whether distance learning, with its distinctive teaching and learning conditions, is actually suitable for them. These doubts may be intensified by inaccurate expectations of distance learning. Ultimately, such false expectations can also lead students to quit their distance learning program prematurely.

Approaches

The Online-Self-Assessment studyNAVI, developed as part of the university-wide FURIOSA project (**F**ern**u**niversitäres **R**essourcen- und **I**nteressen- **O**nline-**S**elf-**A**ssessment) in collaboration with key departments at FernUniversität in Hagen, aims to address these challenges. StudyNAVI was implemented in May 2022, providing prospective students with the opportunity to anonymously reflect on their expectations of distance learning and compare them with the conditions at FernUniversität. Consequently, studyNAVI ties in with various other support services provided by FernUniversität in Hagen, such as those offered by studyFIT or different internal counselling centres.

Moreover, studyNAVI is intended to enable self-evaluations of past and future (online) work behaviour, thereby encouraging prospective students to actively face up to their own skills, expectations, and personal motivation.

StudyNAVI is an optional service provided free of charge. Unlike other online self-assessments, designed as entrance or aptitude tests, enrollment at FernUniversität in Hagen does not depend on the students' studyNAVI results.

The aim of studyNAVI is, on the contrary, to provide prospective students with a realistic understanding of distance learning, encourage self-reflection, and draw attention to the services available at the FernUniversität. This, on the one hand, enables prospective students to access tailored information about counselling and support services as well as various possibilities to organize distance learning to strengthen their resources and mitigate initial challenges. On the other hand, this shall convey a realistic study routine and encourage active self-reflection to enhance the motivation and satisfaction of those who decide to enroll.

StudyNAVI aims to encourage prospective students who may hesitate to commence distance learning or unnecessarily doubt their suitability for it. A further central aim is a decrease in dropout rates and enhanced satisfaction of distance learners.

Construction
StudyNAVi comprises two parts:

During the *expectation check*, participants are asked to evaluate 30 statements (expectations) with respect to their accuracy. Following each statement, participants receive immediate feedback on their judgement ('Your assessment is correct/incorrect.'). An information text for each expectation follows, providing a brief explanation. Additionally, participants are directed to further information pages and to counseling and support services offered by FernUniversität in Hagen with corresponding links.

A short quiz revisiting ten of the previously reviewed expectations follows the expectation check. This is intended to assess the retention of information from the information texts.

The *competency check* assesses competencies in the areas of technology, social skills (with fellow students and instructors), communication, time management, as well as a tendency towards procrastination and self-efficacy with respect to study enrolment. Students are required to provide self-assessments on a five-point Likert scale, indicating the extent to which they agree with specific statements (1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*). An example item for technological competence is: 'I master a variety of computer technologies.'. Each competency is examined through various items (e.g., 5 items for technological competence, 18 items for procrastination). After each competency assessment, participants receive personalized feedback that reflects the strength of their competencies, determined by their individual scores.

Given that studyNAVI was not designed to deny or discourage students' study capabilities, in the case of a low competency feedback, attention is drawn to potential for improvement, with a corresponding reference to the support and counselling services available at FernUniversität.

The two aforementioned parts are framed by evaluation questions (presented before and after completing the parts), whereby participants are asked to appraise how certain they are distance learning suits them**;** how certain they are to take up their studies at the FernUniversität in Hagen; how well they feel informed about it and how competent they feel to complete a distance learning program successfully. The evaluation questions are intended to provide initial insights into whether studyNAVI contributes to the goals mentioned above. Additionally, for further evaluation purposes, participants are asked to provide personal information, such as socio-demographic details or field of study interest. Providing such information is voluntary and can be skipped.

Implementation

In addition to the cross-disciplinary online self-assessment (OSA) studyNAVI, further study-specific OSAs have already been implemented.

- studyNAVI ReWi from the Faculty of Law
- studyNAVI Psychology from the Faculty of Psychology
- studyNAVI International (English, Ukrainian, Russian) for prospective students from abroad

In January 2024, studyNAVI underwent a revision, focusing on adjusting the wording of expectations and redesigning the layout.

Outcomes

Since its implementation, 3625 participants (i.e., prospective students) took part in studyNAVI (January 2024). The age group of 25 to 31 years was the most frequent one (N = 3312; 25.4%), followed by the age group of 32 to 38 years (23.1%). While the sample was, overall, balanced with respect to gender, women were slightly overrepresented, accounting for 52.7% of all participants. The majority of participants (85.7%) indicated to be first-time distance learners. Among them, 38.1% mentioned they had already completed a previous degree. A major part of participants (70.3%) stated their intention to complete their studies on a part-time basis. This is not surprising, given that the majority (53.8%) of participants indicated they had a full-time job (approx. 39 hours/week and more).

Overall, studyNAVI was perceived positively by prospective students. In the open feedback participants mentioned that the OSA was informative and engaging to them and provided helpful guidance. The expenditure of time was perceived as appropriate by 81.1% of participants, and in the overall assessment, studyNAVI received an average score of 7 out of 10 points.

The analysis of the evaluation questions indicated that prospective students benefited from studyNAVI. After completing studyNAVI, participants felt better informed about studying at FernUniversität (ΔM = 14.07), $t(3290) = 34.16$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.60$, and were more certain to take up their studies at the FernUniversität in Hagen (ΔM = 3.85), $t(3201) = 18.06$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.32$. Moreover, the confidence to successfully complete a distance learning program also increased after completing studyNAVI (ΔM = 3.52),

t(3214) = 17.30, *p* < .001, *d* = 0.31. Overall, prospective students were more certain that distance learning was the right choice for them after participating in studyNAVI (Δ*M* = 3.28), *t*(3212) = 16.45, *p* < .001, *d* = 0.29. These results indicate that studyNAVI contributes to the project goals mentioned above and particularly supports individuals in starting their studies at the FernUniversität.

Comparable examples

There are currently a multitude of online self-assessments that focus on both general- and subject-specific study orientation. The OSA Portal, a joint project of Hochschule der Bundesagentur für Arbeit, the Fachhochschule Nordwestschweiz and the Universität Salzburg, provides a good overview in this regard.

Hochschule der Bundesagentur für Arbeit & Fachhochschule Nordwestschweiz (2024). *Übersicht deutschsprachiger Online-Self-Assessments zur Studienorientierung.* https://www.osa-portal.de/

Good Practice #7

English Learning Support: Immersive, interactive and open to all

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With its Internationalisation Strategy the FernUniversität in Hagen has, among other initiatives, established an English Learning Support service addressing general and subject-specific language proficiency by providing bridging courses and other learning formats. Although German is the medium of instruction in all degree programmes, students of all disciplines are compelled to contend with English language literature. Over the years, English Medium Instruction (EMI) has crept into the odd Business or Economics module; collaborative projects with other universities are invariably undertaken in English and students who are so inclined are welcome to submit their Psychology theses in English. Whereas first year students at bricks and mortar universities are generally school leavers with a uniform skill-set that perforce includes English language proficiency, students who choose the distance learning route afforded by the FernUniversität possess diverse educational and professional experiences. Thus, students for whom English was not a compulsory subject at school or those who have heretofore had little reason or opportunity to improve their English language competence have recourse to the English Learning Support service. What distinguishes the studyFIT English Learning Support measures from language courses available elsewhere is that the new bridging courses are designed with the university's curricula in mind.

Introduction

It has been two years since the FernUniversität's Centre for Learning and Innovation (ZLI) established the student support division studyFIT whose primary clientele are derived from the annual intake of 12 000 students. Minimising attrition and supporting students in both subject-specific competencies and overall disposition are essential ends. In an essay on the state of German higher education, Heublein, Richter and Schmelzer (2020) indicate that the higher student enrolments in the past two decades have been accompanied not by increased graduation rates, but by a steady drop-out rate. Real and perceived subject difficulty and lack of motivation are the top reasons that German students fail to complete their studies (Berthold, 2017). Since advanced English language skills are a de facto, albeit unofficial requirement for pursuing a degree today, it was a given that alongside Data Literacy, Mathematics and Statistics, English Learning Support should be included in the new studyFIT portfolio. The courses would invariably be optional and open to both prospective and current students; however, it was to be impressed upon the students that they stood to gain much by availing themselves of these opportunities.

Impetus

Some isolated course evaluations and focus group discussions from several years prior had indicated that students in all five faculties would welcome assistance with English. In launching the English Learning

Support service in earnest in 2022, it was necessary to conduct an updated study that sought feedback from the entire student body. A campus-wide survey was deployed online, attracting 1376 respondents. A mere 4% indicated that they were confident when reading English language texts. The desiderata included courses that incorporated vocabulary building exercises, games and the aforementioned reading of academic texts. There was some overlap with the skills identified as essential by several professors and lecturers who were interviewed as part of the fact-finding process.

At the same time, a separate longitudinal study was launched to ascertain the efficacy of a certain language learning platform. Almost 2800 students joined the Moodle environment in which the application was hosted; their engagement with the platform was monitored and direct feedback was also solicited. The study came to an end after two years, at the beginning of April 2024. Whilst beginners and students with intermediate competence in English were spoilt for choice in terms of the grammar exercises on offer, the overall engagement levels did not warrant extending the service beyond the study. Furthermore, soon after launching the study it became clear that the competencies required to pursue an academic degree could not be trained effectively via a tool that was designed for a global, non-specialist audience. It was deemed necessary to instigate the type of content-based instruction that is aligned to the FernUniversität's curricula. Thus, it was decided that a series of English for Specific Purposes bridging courses would be designed for four of the university's faculties. The Faculty of Law, where an English language qualification is uniquely a prerequisite for graduation, already offered two legal English courses on the Open Moodle platform, courses which were developed by EDELNet – the European Distance Education in Law Network programme.

Approaches

Whilst the conceptualisation of the courses was informed in part by the tenets of Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) much modification was necessary since the collaborative and communicative aspects of that instructional paradigm fall by the wayside in the passive, self-paced mode that is conducive to our distance learning set-up. Nevertheless, some aspects could be adopted. The courses entail full immersion, with all video lectures, readings and scaffolding materials presented wholly in English. As such, students are alerted to the fact that in order for the course to be worthwhile, they initially need to have a minimum level of B2 on the global scale of the Common European Framework. This is necessary, since the courses do not cover grammar and other foundational skills, all of which can be acquired in countless courses that are available both online and off, free or for a fee. What distinguishes the studyFIT English Learning Support measures is that these are bridging courses designed with the university's curricula in mind. For example, some readings included in the courses were recommended by teaching staff from the various faculties, and as mentioned, the requisite skills had also been articulated by them from the outset.

Construction

The first English Learning Support course to be launched was English for Humanities and Social Sciences, which was released in December 2023 after a successful six-month long pilot phase. The efficacy of the courses was declared by students who had dutifully completed all the tasks. The feedback they proffered included the fact that the themes were indeed in line with the topics they were covering in their various degree programmes. For example, the first unit in the course explores the state of the Humanities and

Social Sciences and the direction that scholarship ought to take at a time when what Doidge, Doyle and Hogan (2020) term a 'tyranny of relevance' is casting a pall on the traditional themes and methods of Humanities and Social Science research.

The course is divided into seven units, five of which focus in turn on a subject from various Institutions within the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences. Thus, there are readings that cover History, Philosophy, Politics, Education and Sociology. Throughout, there are video lectures on rhetoric and composition as well as vocabulary building activities; listening comprehension tasks based on interviews especially filmed for the course; quizzes and optional writing assignments that introduce students to key text genres such as abstracts, essays, annotated bibliographies and the five-chapter thesis.

Whilst Psychology as a discipline is unquestionably a Social Science, at the FernUniversität it is a separate faculty and as such it was deemed necessary to present students intending on taking that path with a dedicated course. It was launched in March 2024. There is little overlap with the English for Humanities and Social Sciences course. Instead, students develop their advanced English skills by delving into a course centred on the principles of second language acquisition. This invariably develops metacognitive skills, since students taking this course engage with various learning theories in each of the five instructional units. Again, recorded lectures add variety to the otherwise passive learning scenario, and the embedded interviews with academics from the Faculty of Psychology – including the Dean – serve not only to impart important information on the various topics, but also to introduce the academics in a pleasant light to new and prospective students.

Still in development are English for Business and Economics and English for Mathematics and Informatics. The overall structure and immersion approach are replicated; however, the specific focuses are again tailored to the themes and readings encountered in the respective courses. Suffice it to say, the decision to keep each bridging course independent means that regardless of one's specialisation, it is possible to take any or all of these courses – a step that ought to be recommended since contemporary scholarship is increasingly interdisciplinary.

Outcomes

To date, over 400 students are already enrolled in both of the Advanced English bridging courses. On successful completion of the unit quizzes, they will be welcome to take an online written assessment which will be offered periodically as the need arises. With the passage of time, further focus group discussions may be conducted, and follow-up interviews will be conducted with the teaching staff at whose behest the courses were designed. For now, however, the studyFIT English Learning Support service is decidedly a success story.

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Good Practice #8

JYU's Orientation to Continuous Learning 1&2

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JYUOpen has an important societal mission to promote educational equality. For this reason, JYUOpen offers learning opportunities for everyone, regardless of their age or educational background. Since there are no admission requirements, students come from diverse backgrounds, including many who have very little or no experience with academic studies. Particularly for them, there are two self-paced online orientation courses: 'Orientation to Continuous Learning 1' (OCL1) and 'Orientation to Continuous Learning 2 – Pathways to Scientific Thinking, Reading, and Writing' (OCL2). In OCL1, students reflect on their study goals, motivation, skills, emotions related to studying, and their need for guidance. The course also assists in scheduling studies and introduces students to JYU's electric student information systems, online learning platforms as well as open science resources. OCL2 focuses on essential academic study skills, including critical thinking, characteristics of scientific texts, reading strategies, defining one's writer profile, and overcoming writing-related blocks. Both courses provide students with videos, assignments, and ample opportunities for self-reflection. The purpose of these courses is to reduce barriers related to starting studies, and their implementation includes the use of metaphors. The course platforms have been developed in collaboration with a commercial partner. According to feedback from students, the courses are motivating and truly helpful for getting started with studies. They are also beneficial for those who already have a higher education degree or experience with academic studies.

Introduction

Education plays a crucial role both from an individual and a societal perspective. It benefits individuals by providing specialized knowledge, critical thinking skills, and networking opportunities. From a societal standpoint, education promotes innovation, economic growth, and overall development. As Finland's largest open university, JYUOpen has a significant role as an educator for citizens and an advocate for educational equality.

JYUOpen offers higher education and various learning opportunities regardless of an individual's background. That's why JYUOpen courses are open to everyone. Typically, studies are paid, but some courses are also offered for free. 'Orientation to Continuous Learning 1' (OCL1) and 'Orientation to Continuous Learning 2 – Pathways to Scientific Thinking, Reading, and Writing' (OCL2) courses are offered free of charge and they aim to support students in developing both general study and academic skills, thus enhancing their chances of succeeding in their studies. Additionally, these courses contribute to students' well-being and study motivation, as well as provide practical assistance in managing study schedules.

Challenges

In 2023, approximately 23,000 students were enrolled in JYUOpen. Since there are no separate admission requirements for studies, students' backgrounds vary significantly: many have already completed a higher education degree or have experience in academic studies, but according to unpublished data from JYUOpen, there are approximately 20 % of students with minimal or no knowledge of university-level education and its demands. These students often struggle to meet the requirements of academic study. Study motivation and student well-being are intricately related (Dahl et al., 2020; Gilar-Corbi et al., 2020; cf. Ryan & Deci, 2018). The lack of academic skills or the experience of study competence directly impact students' motivation levels: engaging with studies and committing to them becomes difficult, and without sufficient support and guidance, their studies are easily left incomplete (Lee & Choi 2011; Lee et al., 2013; Maunula et al., 2021).

In addition to underdeveloped academic skills, another significant reason for study discontinuation is related to students' well-being (Hjorth et al., 2016). The pandemic era was harsh on students: loneliness, and a lack of timely support in online learning took a toll on many students' mental health. When an individual is unwell, it becomes challenging to remain active and self-directed, and focus on studying. Students also need support in managing their mental well-being and harmful beliefs related to their studies (Hjorth et al., 2016; Lee et al., 2009).

Approaches

JYUOpen has developed two 1-credit orientation courses for academic studies, focusing on enhancing students' scientific skills and self-reflection abilities. These courses are entirely self-paced and studied online. The course environments – designed by a commercial digital agency – are visually engaging and user-friendly, making the transition to academic studies more accessible. Students complete tasks within the learning environment and receive automatic feedback. After completing tasks for each section, students can download a competency badge, which they submit for verification in Moodle. The teachers verify that all badges have been submitted. The courses are assessed on a pass-fail scale.

Each course is grounded in its own metaphor pertaining to some aspects of learning. The OCL1 course utilizes an amusement park theme, emphasizing the idea that life sometimes feels like a spinning carousel. The course provides tools and assistance to slow down this whirlwind. In contrast, the OCL2 course takes students on a nature trail to explore the academic skills that can be developed along the way. Peer support is also present in both courses: JYUOpen students from different disciplines share their experiences in videos and interviews, discussing what academic studies are like, the challenges they face, and how they've overcome those challenges.

On the OCL1 course, there are five different amusement park attractions or devices, each with its own theme. In the ups and downs of the Roller Coaster, students can clarify their main and intermediate goals as well as their motivation for studying. In the House of Mirrors, students get to know themselves as learners: they examine their study skills as well as the resources and challenges in their life that either promote or hinder their studies. Additionally, students reflect on the thoughts and emotions that studying evokes, and through various self-directed exercises, they can enhance their self-compassion and self-

efficacy, as well as learn to make conscious choices that promote their studies. The goal is to increase students' sense of competence in their studies. On the Bumper Car Track, students discover their need for guidance and where they can seek support, advice, and guidance when needed. This section encourages students to approach their studies with enthusiasm, and they learn to utilize various tools and channels to enhance their studies. In the whirlwind of the Carousel, students explore whether now is the right time for academic studies in their life. Students plan out and schedule their studies in relation to other areas of their life. In the Arcade, the focus is on JYU's electric student information systems, online learning platforms as well as open science resources, and students can assess how well they fare with them.

Each section includes various tasks and exercises. Students can go through the themes in any order they prefer, and the learning environment guides them forward. After completing the course, students will understand what academic study entails and what skills it requires. They will recognize that committing to studies takes time and that the studies can be integrated into their daily life. Furthermore, they will appreciate the importance of reflecting on and evaluating their own learning, study skills, and resources, and use this information to develop themselves as well-being students.

The OCL2 course focuses on academic foundational skills and competencies: scientific and critical thinking, as well as academic reading and writing. Especially in the beginning of studies, these skills may seem challenging, but the course assures the students that they are learnable. These skills are essential for university studies, as they directly relate to both study motivation and successful completion of courses. Lack of these fundamental competences can hinder students and even lead to dropping out of studies.

On OCL2 the metaphor for learning is a nature trail on which students are invited to calm down, securely explore, and learn academic study skills. The trail represents the journey required for skill acquisition: learning – especially of academic skills – takes time, and it's a continuous process. Along the nature trail, students visit four different destinations. In the Forest Cabin, they become familiar with the characteristics of scientific and critical thinking, as well as the ability to evaluate issues from various perspectives. At the Scenic Cliff, students delve into the features of scientific texts, strategies that support scientific reading, and the benefits of effective reading. They also practice reading texts relevant to academic studies. On the Suspension Bridge, they learn the principles of scientific writing, citation practices, and engage in small-scale writing exercises. Finally, at the Campfire Shelter, students assess their own academic skills.

The course includes various independently completed tasks, allowing students to arouse their independent critical thinking, and improve their academic reading and writing skills. After completing the course, students will recognize the differences between everyday thinking and scientific thinking, understand the complexity of academic reading, and possess the ability to process, comprehend, and evaluate what they read. Students become aware of their strengths and areas for improvement as writers and will gain proficiency in scientific writing. Additionally, they will be able to assess their own competence as university students. The overall goal of the course is to empower students to confidently engage in academic studies and apply the skills they've learned during the course.

Together with the content from the OCL1 course, these materials enhance students' general readiness for university-level studies. The ultimate goal of both courses is to recognize the significance of lifelong learning in an individual's life and skill development.

Outcomes

In 2023, there were 1007 registrations for the OCL1 course, out of which 632 students completed it. This means that 62.8% of the students passed the course. The OCL2 course opened in August 2023, and during the 5-month period, 549 students registered for it, of whom 331 successfully completed it. The pass rate was thus 60.3%. These pass rates can be considered relatively good since the courses are voluntary and entirely self-paced for students.

Students are also asked for feedback on the course, and a completion mark cannot be obtained without responding to the feedback survey. Based on content analysis, three main themes can be identified from the feedback: (1) technical and visual implementation of the course, (2) content-related aspects, and (3) feedback related to motivation and encouragement.

(1) According to feedback, the beginning of the course works well from a technical perspective, and both courses receive praise for their visual appeal. Metaphors have been perceived as supportive of learning since they help students to recognize their own feelings, and at the same time, they depict studying not only serious hard work but also fun and meaningful. Additionally, the course sections are considered clear and informative, and the overall structure is thoughtfully organized and cohesive. Students appreciate the ability to explore different course areas and complete tasks at their own pace and in their preferred order. (2) Regarding course content, students specifically highlight the support for self-efficacy: the courses help identify one's strengths and areas for improvement, reduce self-criticism, and clarify goal setting. Students gain confidence that they don't need to fear their weaknesses, and peer experiences and support play a significant role in understanding their own situation, thoughts, and emotions, as well as practicing self-compassion. One student aptly described the courses as a personal exploration of their unique learning style. (3) The personalized approach is indeed motivating. The courses spark interest and enthusiasm for learning, benefiting not only first-time university students but also those returning to education from the workforce and even more experienced learners. After completing the courses, barrier to starting studies is lowered, and studying itself feels less intimidating.

Based on student feedback, it can be noted that both OCL courses are genuinely beneficial, supporting commitment to studies, study retention and successful completion.

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Good Practice #9

OU Ready – Delivery of a consistent and equitable induction to new students

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First year success is vital for positive student outcomes and early engagement with preparatory material can be a contributor to this. This case study describes the approach taken to pilot a new Induction resource – OU Ready – on key entry-level courses at The Open University. Through provision of a more equitable and consistent approach to induction, we aim to better prepare students for studying at a distance and address some of the current challenges we face in this area. Findings from the evaluation of this work will provide recommendations for enhancements to OU Ready and evidence to inform a decision as to whether induction should become mandated for all new students.

Introduction

At The Open University (OU), internal analysis demonstrates that first year success is vital to achieve positive student outcomes - students who pass their first year are almost twice as likely to return to the next year of study. Evidence shows that students who engage early (prior to course start) with the OU's Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) – the platform used for online delivery and use of resources designed to facilitate preparedness, such as the OpenLearn Badged Open Course, *Being an OU Student*, are around 10% more likely to complete and pass their first course and progress to further study when compared to non-engagers.

Currently induction resources are provided to our new students across many different platforms and by curriculum teams, student support services and specialist areas such as the OU Library. Whilst with best intentions to better prepare our students, this has resulted in a disjointed and overwhelming experience as they strive to navigate through the wealth of resources and services on offer.

Underpinned by such evidence, OU Ready is a key piece in the Structured Induction and Early proactive support project which aims to develop a more equitable and consistent approach to induction. This work falls under the OU's pillar of work in promoting retention. The new structured approach to student induction will help students to set more realistic expectations on what OU study is like and enable them to feel more informed, supported, and confident in their preparedness for successful study. The new induction experience will incorporate principles from the OU's Integrated Induction Framework. The project aims to provide evidence to inform decisions around an institutional policy for mandated induction for all new students.

Challenges

Based on internal data and observation, we know that key challenges to first year success include:

- Withdrawals - patterns for new students follow a similar trend year-on-year. A considerable proportion of students withdraw between reserving a place on a course and the first fee liability point, shortly after course start.
- Students experiencing 'pain-points' at specific times across their first year of study
- New students having lower pass rates than continuing students
- The existence of large awarding gaps across our student population
- An inconsistent approach to induction, including location and format of, and signposting to, induction resources, with much repetition.

Approaches

Informed by insights around the key challenges related to first year success and our existing knowledge of effective actions to improve retention, OU Ready tests the concept of the provision of a set induction period 6-4 weeks before module start. The work is managed from the Office for the Pro-Vice Chancellor for Students (PVC-S), led by an Academic Lead with input from the Induction Consultancy Group, encompassing stakeholders from Faculties, all four UK Nations[1] OU Offices and Student Support areas across the OU.

The new OU Ready website was piloted across 7 key entry-level courses, with cross-faculty representation, from October 2023. The resource was made available 6 weeks before course start and has the 'look and feel' of a standard OU course website, with the aim of familiarising students with their study environment easing their transition into digital learning and bringing all induction resources under one umbrella. The material was adapted from existing content from the OpenLearn *Being an OU Student* Badged Open Course and OU Access course material and is therefore generic with subject-specific induction material still being provided by discipline area. Divided into 4 units, with an estimated study duration of 18 hours, OU Ready covers what to expect as a distance learner, how to connect with the OU community, how to navigate the OU VLE, where to go for support, overview of modules and tutorials, assessments and developing study skills and setting goals.

Printed packs of OU Ready, containing relevant content, were also sent to Students in Secure Environments (SiSE) registered on the pilot modules.

Evaluation of OU Ready comprises three elements:

1. In-unit feedback provides a 'real-time' mechanism for gauging usefulness of content and resources.
2. An online student survey in late December 2023, after all first assignments had passed, collected further quantitative and qualitative data reflecting student opinion on the usefulness of OU Ready once they had actively been studying, with an alternative paper copy disseminated to SiSE.
3. Quantitative data relating to student progress at course milestones, such as first assessment submission, course pass, as well as active and passive withdrawal. This data will also be analysed with a lens on potential impact on closing awarding gaps across our student population.

OU Ready aligns to the other elements of the overarching Structured induction and proactive support project:

- Machine learning/analytics to be used to assess 'student readiness' and to target interventions and student communications.
- Early pro-active conversations with students, before study, to understand their needs and sign-post targeted resources.
- Enhanced induction communications programme.

Outcomes

Engagement with OU Ready has been encouraging, with an uptake of 35% of the approximately 16,500 eligible students accessing the resource from its inception in August 2023. As hoped, engagement levels climbed through the induction period 6-4 weeks prior to course start in early October and then tapered off as students embarked on their study. Responses to the in-unit feedback, which provide a snapshot of student voice at the point of engagement, were high, with nearly 2000 students providing feedback on Unit 1, and around 650 for Unit 4 and the resource in its entirety.

Evaluation of OU Ready is currently underway. Preliminary analysis of the surveys and in-unit feedback is largely positive, with students reporting increased confidence, feeling more prepared and being glad of the opportunity for familiarisation before study start. The content was perceived as useful/helpful, with students appreciating the inclusion of real-life student stories. Feedback is also highlighting areas for enhancement and consideration for further iterations, such as frustration with repetition with other induction resources, the need for more subject-specific content and scope for developing areas around digital skills, goal-setting and academic conduct.

The findings of the OU Ready pilot will contribute to the enhancement of the resource going forward and its roll out to more new OU students, with the ambition for 75% new students taking the induction by 2025/26. Planned changes for the next iteration also include digital badging of the resource, to incentivize and facilitate engagement measures and work with stakeholders to align induction events and activities within the specified induction window. Evidence will also inform the decision as to whether induction should be mandated for all new OU students.

References

The complete evaluation of the pilot of OU Ready will allow for a more detailed exploration of the findings and the impact on retention through better preparing our students. The team aim to disseminate the findings both internally and externally, as appropriate, to enable sharing of best practice.

Good Practice #10

UNED Online Reception Plan

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The subject addressed in this contribution is induction, understood as a set of activities and resources intended to introduce students to a new learning environment. Given the size and complexity of UNED, and the high dropout rates of students during their first year in a programme of studies, induction plans are a key element of any realistic, evidence-based retention policy. Induction at UNED revolves around the online reception plan, whose main features and underlying assumptions are described below. Students and faculty deem the current reception plan, which has evolved gradually since its inception in 2005, as both necessary and satisfactory. The key action of the plan is to create Virtual Induction Communities across UNED, giving students the opportunity to immerse themselves in university life and plan their performance from Day One.

Introduction

A high percentage of students who leave university without completing their degree (dropout rate) is a persistent challenge for distance teaching universities. UNED is not different from other open and distance universities in this regard. Students tend to drop out in the early stages of the programme of studies of their choice. In the first ten years of the EHEA, the fact was that most UNED students dropped out without having taken their first exam.

In this context, it is mandatory for faculty and administrators to design and implement a reception plan based on the needs of new students. The key purpose of the reception plan is to lead students towards autonomy and self-regulation. Self-regulating students tend to be active (as opposed to reactive) and their motivation is more likely to remain strong during the time required to complete a programme of studies.

Reception plans at UNED must take into account the singular structure of this university, with central headquarters and faculties in Madrid, and local associated centres all over Spain, plus 23 centres abroad. Associated centres provide physical infrastructures for students to learn and take exams. Managed locally and enjoying a significant degree of autonomy, associated centres may design and develop their own reception plans and actions, some of which may be face to face. At a general level, UNED decided in 2005 to implement an online reception plan, designed by the IUED (University Institute of Distance Education, a UNED body). The COIE (Guidance and Employment Centre) was also instrumental in the design and implementation of the reception plan.

UNED Online Reception Plan: Structure and Actions

The online reception plan stands on four pillars: information, orientation, follow-up and training. It aims at providing essential knowledge of how UNED works, and intends to instil in students the idea of self-

regulating learning. A guiding question inspiring the reception plan is “how can we make students connect to the university from Day One?

The reception plan offers support and counselling throughout the first year and from the moment of enrolment. In includes action in five key areas: 1) registration, 2) courses 0, 3) Virtual Induction Communities, 4) guidance and study techniques, and 5) exams. It also considers resources specially designed for students’ first day at UNED.

Your First Day at UNED. A specific link gives students access to resources explaining UNED’s methodology in detail and providing basic information about support services. It also provides students with a study planner (Excel file) and an academic calendar.

Registration. The key idea is to guide students to choose the right number of credits in each phase of their studies at UNED. Guidance is provided through online interactive resources meant to help each student to make a decision tailored to their circumstances and needs.

Courses 0. Two types of courses are on offer. First, courses aimed at detecting the initial level of knowledge and competence of each student. Second, courses offering training of the tools students will need to use throughout the academic year. The courses (MOOC) are offered on the Open UNED platform.

Virtual Induction Communities (VIC): VICs are the main asset of the reception plan as they centralize and use most of the resources of the plan. Access to VICs is open from the early days of September. Each Faculty and School has its own Virtual Induction Communities, as do the University Access Course and the EHEA Master’s Degrees. All new students are registered in a VIC where a counsellor, a mentoring student, and a technician can address their needs and update students on new developments. Access to VICs is voluntary for students. Prominent among the issues addressed in the VICs are UNED’s methodology (online and blended), as well as technological tools and resources. VICs may also use gamification, offering students induction games, with challenges and activities designed to make students feel confident and engaged since their first days at UNED.

Guidance and Study Techniques. The COIE offers students further orientation on planning study and the preparation for exams, along with practical guides on how to make effective use of UNED’s virtual platforms.

Exams. UNED evaluates students in two different ways: through Continuous Evaluation Activities (graded by supervising tutors at the Associated Centres) and through On-Site Exams (prepared and graded by professors at UNED headquarters and sat at the Associated Centres). The reception plan provides students with materials that help students face exams, including a complete bank of past exams.

Challenges

- Diminish the rates of dropout students in their first year at UNED.
- Design tools and mobilize resources to address the dropout problem in first-year students.

- Provide tools that help students to make a good start at UNED and to remain engaged throughout their first year

Approaches

- Foster the emergence of autonomous, self-regulating students by giving them the necessary tools from the first day at UNED
- Involve the two main levels of UNED's structure: Schools and Faculties, on the one hand, and Associated Centres, on the other hand. Give each School, Faculty and Associated Centre the proper measure of autonomy to adapt the reception plan to specific circumstances and needs.

Outcomes

Virtual Induction Communities, the principal asset of the reception plan, have been a success in terms of access by new students. In the 2021-2022 academic year, out of 48.887 new students 46.653 did access their specific VIC (95.42%), with only 2.234 students who had not accessed at all.

Data on induction results show that most students who have engaged in the proposed activities consider they are far better prepared to start their programme of studies (71.4%).

However, the precise impact of the reception plan on dropout rates is difficult to measure as such rates depend on multiple variables, not all of them addressable by institutional policies. Some private circumstances of students will always tip the scales against continuing studies regardless of any induction or retention policy, a fact that naturally tends to be higher in online and distance universities than in on-site institutions. Furthermore, factors not considered in the retention plan, such as the quality of education or the flexibility of examination dates may also have a strong influence on the decision to continue to study at UNED.

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Good Practice #11

Fast-track access – a future model for widening participation?

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This report from the UK Open University is based on an innovation targeting students from disadvantaged backgrounds with low prior entry qualifications. The University's Access programme has registered around 4,000 students annually since 2013, but a significant number of new students who might need a preparatory experience choose to enter directly at undergraduate level (as open access, permits). Internal data suggests that this has a negative impact on undergraduate retention and success as many students are insufficiently prepared. As partial mitigation, the Access team 'telescoped' a part-time Access module from 30 weeks to 18 and timed it to enable students to progress to undergraduate study in one academic year, therefore not adding an additional year to study time. As a result, a new demographic was attracted, more focused on the benefits of preparing for higher education. Initial evaluation revealed this group were highly motivated, and had significantly higher progression rates onto further study than conventional Access students. The authors suggest HE participation and success could be widened by giving greater attention to the needs of learners returning to study, particularly in relation to the flexibility, duration and timing of preparatory provision.

Introduction

The Open University (OU) is a long-established provider of distance education across the four UK nations and is committed, in its charter, to being 'open to all'. This social justice mission is demonstrated in its recognition that part-time adult learners, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds, may need a programme of preparation prior to commencing their undergraduate studies. This need is amplified for three overlapping groups of learners:

- Those returning to study after a break from unsuccessful compulsory education.
- Those possessing low prior educational qualifications (below standard UK matriculation requirements), or with no qualifications at all, including some studying in secure environments.
- Those with low incomes who qualify for an institutional fee waiver.

The common thread that binds all these students is a lack of confidence in their ability to succeed at university study.

The OU has presented a suite of three 30-credit distance learning Access modules annually since 2013, studied part-time over 30 weeks. The interdisciplinary modules (Arts and Languages; People, Work and Society; and Science, Technology and Maths) are presented three times per year. They are assessed at level 0 and, designed to prepare students for progression to undergraduate qualifications by creating a love of subject through engaging content as well as building academic confidence and studentship skills. Modules are divided into three Blocks; the first dispatched as print material, and the second and third accessed via the module's Virtual Learning Environment/website. Students are assigned a tutor who provides one-to-one proactive support, largely through telephone contact, as well as assessment feedback on four assignments.

Students from disadvantaged backgrounds who commence their OU studies with an Access module are retained and perform significantly better (+10pp) than similar students who enter undergraduate study directly (see Butcher et al., 2018; 2020; Butcher and Clarke, 2021; 2022), suggesting adult learners with low prior qualifications who are under-prepared for undergraduate study are less likely to be retained.

Challenges

The OU Access modules, although included as a first voluntary step in the institution's undergraduate qualification framework, are not mandatory. Students with low prior entry qualifications are not obliged to take an Access module. Marketing research has established that many motivated students (who might benefit from it) are put off starting their OU studies with an Access module due to its 30-week length, effectively adding a year to a part-time student's learning journey – a significant barrier for returners. The institutional challenge was to address the unacceptable attrition of students from disadvantaged backgrounds attempting undergraduate study without sufficient preparation, many of whom could have benefitted from an Access module.

In addressing this challenge, two areas of academic literature relating to widening participation were consulted:

1. The importance of flexible curriculum design (Curry and Butcher, 2021; Fowle and Butcher, 2019; Butcher and Fowle, 2018; Schofield and Gisby, 2020; Chaplin et al., 2021).
2. The extent to which accelerated programmes enable student persistence and success (Tatum, 2010; Wlodkowski, 2003; Boyd, 2004; Geltner and Logan, 2001) or inhibit both (Anastasi, 2007; Petrowsky, 1996; Sakaly, 1995; Tatum and Parker, 2007).

Approaches

To shift the perception that an Access module slows a returning student's journey to their intended qualification, and to address undergraduate retention issues, the team piloted a fast-track version of its Arts and Languages module (which required the fewest changes). The established 30-week learning experience was telescoped into 18 weeks – effectively students studied the same material at twice the speed of the conventional part-time module, with assessment deadlines appearing twice as fast. The considerable amount of tutor support was retained although provided over a shorter timeframe.

The intervention was specifically designed to enable more students to achieve their study goals and to promote greater inclusion and flexibility amongst students from disadvantaged backgrounds. We wanted to make 'preparedness' for undergraduate study a more attractive option to more students. We also hoped to gain insights into the experience of students who recognise they may need an Access module but who want to 'get on with' undergraduate learning as quickly as possible. We thus wanted to explore the nature of a previously unidentified group of adult learners from disadvantaged backgrounds – those avoiding our conventional Access provision but self-aware enough to recognise a need for adequate preparation, and confident enough to cope with a more intensive preparatory study pattern. The study intensity of the fast track version in fact mimicked the study intensity of part-time qualification study at the OU.

Initially, the fast-track version was piloted with a capped number of students, who had received targeted advice and guidance to ensure they understood the requirements and were confident about coping with an intensive preparatory learning experience. A small group of experienced Access Arts and Languages tutors were appointed to teach fast-track, and all were keen to participate with researchers to identify 'what worked' and to develop plans to mitigate any unintended consequences. Our three research questions were:

1. Does the fast-track version of a module attract students who would not otherwise study Access – a different kind of Access learner?
2. Does a fast-track version enable students to succeed at Access and progress?
3. Does increasing flexibility better meet the needs of students from disadvantaged backgrounds?

A mixed-methods approach was utilised (Turner et al., 2017) to explore in detail the experience of learning and teaching on a fast-track preparatory module. Analysis of the relevant academic literature and scrutiny of performance data informed prompt questions for an online discussion with the tutors, responses from which informed questions asked of all fast-track students in an online survey, followed by semi-structured interviews with ten students.

Outcomes

Acknowledging the relatively small size of the fast-track innovation (impact with the 45 piloting learners), some unexpected outcomes were produced. For example, the standard and fast-track cohort were more similar demographically than we expected, with the proportion studying with a fee waiver marginally higher on the fast-track module. Most significantly, a higher percentage of fast-track students progressed to an undergraduate module (68 per cent compared with 34 per cent registered on the conventional module).

Analysis of the mixed data sources resulted in five broad outcome themes:

- Student motivation (this group wanting to get on with things and align with starting UG study in October - timing incentivised engagement).
- Institutional advice and guidance (crucial importance of clarity around implications of choosing the fast-track – need to fully understand what was being taken on).
- The fast-track experience itself (students very focused, organised, and proactive, prioritising study but nervous of online learning - they wanted time to practice and develop digital skills).
- Teaching and support from tutors (interviewees reported positive and inspiring experiences with their tutors – proactive encouragement was crucial).
- Student outcomes (learners benefited in terms of confidence and pride in achieving study goals – institutional progression improved).

As the survey and focus groups demonstrated, the fast-track version of the Access module did attract students who would not otherwise have studied the conventional version, enabling students to succeed and progress. This was also displayed in the different motivations, aspirations, and behaviour of the fast-

track students. The findings will aid the Access team and all faculties at the OU in establishing the efficacy of a faster preparatory route to undergraduate study for learners with low prior entry qualifications.

Comparable examples

In the UK, a wide range of preparatory provision includes: full-time Foundation Years (Year 0) offered by most conventional universities for students not meeting entry requirements (Johnson, 2018, Leech et al, 2016); full-time Access to HE Diplomas offered by many local Colleges of Further Education (James & Busher, 2018;) and shorter but still full-time 'boot camps' (for example, Edgehill University offers a free full-time Foundation Certificate, which runs for seven weeks in the summer). However, the opportunities for part-time distance learning students to engage with preparatory programmes remain limited.

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Good Practice #12

Data Literacy Basic Course

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The basic Data Literacy course is aimed at students from all faculties, especially those in their first semester. The low-threshold course teaches basic skills in dealing with different types of data from various fields. It has been designed as a self-study course that includes a series of asynchronous learning units of different types. Students learn basic techniques for the process model of data value creation, for categorising different types of data, for collecting their own data, dealing with data ethics and data protection issues, the legal treatment of data in civil and criminal law as well as the management of research data. Participants develop a critical eye for the interpretation of statistical results and graphics and develop a basic understanding of both statistical programming and generative AI tools. These basic data literacy skills can not only provide support during their studies, but also represent useful further training for their professional life. As the course is interdisciplinary, addresses a wide variety of subjects and can only teach basic skills due to the large number of different subject areas, it is difficult to provide empirical evidence of a concrete improvement in academic success through participation. However, students reported that they were able to supplement and improve their data skills through active participation in the course.

Introduction

The need for increased teaching of data literacy results from the digitalisation of all areas of life, which increasingly requires the ability to collect, manage, evaluate and apply data in a critical manner. Data literacy is the ability to deal with data in a planned manner and to consciously use and scrutinise it in the respective context (Heidrich & Krupka, 2018). It is necessary to be able to use data within a specific subject area and access (new) data sources appropriately. Furthermore, data literacy also means dealing with an oversupply of data and making well-founded decisions. This requires the ability to differentiate between data and information with regard to interpretations and opinions. Data literacy as a cross-sectional competence; therefore, it ultimately also supports the responsible handling of data and data-based systems (Grillenberger & Romeike, 2018).

Challenges

The increasing digitalisation of all areas of life is generating more and more data. Whether in a scientific context, in media reporting, in the healthcare sector or in the private sphere, data is omnipresent; it is available in large quantities and requires classification and interpretation. Data-driven research is increasing in every scientific field, and therefore students of all study programmes have to acquire at least basic data competences to obtain a degree. Furthermore, universities would fail to prepare their students for their professional careers as basic data competences are required in more and more jobs. At FernUniversität in Hagen the diversity in terms of data literacy is high due to the study programmes offered – ranging from Mathematics and Computational Science to Humanities and Social Sciences – and the

diverse professional and educational backgrounds of the students. Although the study programmes increasingly provide methodology courses, not all data competences can be covered adequately by the curricula. Data Law, for instance, requires specific up-to-date knowledge because regulations are changing due to new and modified laws and court decisions at a speed only law experts can keep up with.

Approaches

Like many other universities, the FernUniversität decided to create a basic data literacy course to give students the opportunity to improve their data competences in a self-paced way. It is designed as a self-learning course in Moodle overseen by an academic instructor at the Centre for Learning and Innovation, which makes it different from the data literacy programmes established at campus universities (Ebeling et al., 2022; Heidrich et al., 2018; Ridsdale et al., 2015). Students from all faculties are invited to take the non-compulsory course, but participation is recommended in some modules. The concept was drawn up in cooperation with a working group composed of experts from all faculties. By doing so, the perspectives and requirements of all the study programmes were considered in terms of the content, and the experts themselves contributed to the course by creating learning materials.

The course begins with a chapter on general organisational information and a subsequent chapter that introduces data literacy. The course consists of five chapters on Establishing a Data Culture, Collecting Data, Applying Data, Managing Data and Analysing Data, combining the recommendations of data literacy frameworks and the characteristics of distance learning (Schüller, 2020).

The sections are composed of the intended learning objectives, instructional materials of different media types and various quizzes and tasks with which students can independently test the skills they have acquired. The content to be worked on ties in with the students' professional and everyday experiences by featuring recurring examples that incorporate this experiential knowledge. Among others, autonomous driving serves as a recurrent example which is discussed in various sections, as it is a current, socially relevant field of application for data literacy, with many points of contact with data, from technical, mathematical and computer science aspects to data law issues and data ethics problems (Taeihagh & Lim, 2019). In the chapter about Analysing Data, real data sets are provided to motivate the students.

The course design allows students to focus on the specific content they want to improve themselves and/or which is complementary to their own academic path. For example, law students can skip the sections about data (protection) law because it is part of their curriculum. Social science students, on the other hand, may choose to skip data analysis and work through the sections on data ethics and collecting data. Nonetheless, students interested in taking a final assessment to earn a certificate of accomplishment must successfully complete all the quizzes and the assignments before writing one short essay about an ethical issue and one R coding assignment. The final assessment is conducted as a digitally proctored written assessment in Moodle once every two months. Should a student not consent to the proctoring measures, he or she may write the assessment at one of the FernUniversität's regional campuses. To afford the students as much flexibility as possible, registration is open for up to 24 hours before the assessment.

Outcomes

The digital self-learning course is attended – as intended by the concept – by students from all faculties in proportion to their share of the total student body. Since the start of the course in November 2022, more than 1.200 students have been enrolled. The gender distribution among the students is almost the same as at the FernUniversität as a whole – 47 percent female and 53 percent male.

In contrast to many other such programmes, since December 2023 the FernUniversität's data literacy course has also been open to prospective students as a preparatory course. Another target group are students who are only interested in specific modules and basic scientific competences and therefore are enrolled in the Open Access Studies. Currently, about 14 percent of the participants belong to this latter group, which is thus overrepresented since Open Access students make up only 9 percent of the student body at the FernUniversität.

As per the course concept, students use the course in different ways. As student feedback has shown, many of them prefer the modular interdisciplinary design which allows them to focus on the content they are interested in and the competences they wish to acquire. Not everyone is interested in taking the whole course, so the fact that only 12 percent of the students have completed the course to date is not a concern but a conscious component of the concept.

In the first two semesters the short essay about an ethical issue had to be conducted, by default, as a group assignment. However, the feedback given by the participants suggested modifying it into a solo assignment because of the amount of time which was necessary to corral all group members and to organise the collaborative writing process. This was at odds with the promise of a self-paced course that was never meant to be time-consuming.

The instructional material has been rated in differing but mainly positive terms, specifically its comprehensibility and the way it is presented. The multimedia learning content, such as videos, expert interviews and interactive graphics, and the interdisciplinary choice of topics provided variety and helped students to sustain their motivation throughout the individual chapters. Amongst the positive reviews, students mentioned the well-structured, short instructional videos with a clearly outlined topic as these helped students to absorb the learning content well. The instructional videos on the basics of statistics received particularly good feedback from a large number of students. On the other hand, the long texts on the subject of data law were sometimes difficult to understand for the non-law students due to the unfamiliar legal terminology and legal argumentations, even though the lecturers had made an effort to formulate text that was understandable for non-specialists. In the opinion of the students, in terms of the level of difficulty and the selection of questions, the short interactive quizzes and tasks at the end of most of the learning units were largely suitable for checking and consolidating the newly acquired knowledge.

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Good Practice #13

Virtual Peer Mentoring for students with disabilities or chronic diseases

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The Peer Mentoring project is aimed at students with disabilities or chronic illnesses, empowering them during their first semesters at the FernUniversität in Hagen. The specific mentoring provided consists of synchronous meetings – some organised by the programme coordinator and some by the students themselves. It is coordinated by the Department for Equal Opportunities and studyFIT, a unit that combines all extracurricular student support programmes. By bringing together freshmen and students from advanced semesters, the Peer Mentoring project responds to students' need to be connected with fellow students in a distance learning setting. Continuous evaluation indicates that the Peer Mentoring project is the safe space that students with disabilities or chronic illnesses are looking for in order to share very personal matters such as the way the illness or disability impacts their lives and their studies. Both mentees and mentors benefit from participation as both are asked to reflect on how they approach studying and how they deal with the concomitant challenges. A frequently discussed issue is compensation for disadvantages and the question whether or not to disclose the disability or chronic illness. Through the Peer Mentoring project, sustainable communities that outlast the initial semester are built and contact points at the distance learning university are made known. Additionally, by participating in workshops based on their specific needs, students will acquire general study skills which will help them to proceed successfully with their studies, thus lowering dropout rates.

Introduction

Due to the flexibility afforded by the online setup, the number of students with a disability and/or chronic illness is on average higher at the FernUniversität than most other German universities. In recent years approximately over 1.000 students belonging to this group have newly enrolled every semester. Addressing this large number is a challenge itself especially when considering the diversity of impairments and therefore the many different needs. The Inclusion concepts of FernUniversität takes this diversity into account. The goal of distance learning without barriers encompasses all areas of the university organization and the blended learning concept of the FernUniversität in Hagen: study materials and learning infrastructure, the examination system, information and advisory services, buildings, advice and training for teaching staff - supported by the university's mission statement. Peer Mentoring is an essential and promising component of the concept as it was shown in different studies (Cardinot & Flynn 2022, Lindsay et al. 2016, Militz et al. 2020, Brocke et al. 2017).

Challenges

Nationwide and international surveys show that students with a disability and/or chronic illness have a great need for guidance, particularly when beginning their studies. In addition to questions about

organising their studies, they often have to clarify individual, sometimes very time-consuming issues (Steinkühler et al., 2023; Hauschildt et al. 2021). Peer mentoring complements the professional counselling provided by the officially designated representatives for students with disabilities and/or chronic illnesses by offering a low-threshold opportunity for networking and exchanging experiences, and it can serve as a guide for students beginning their studies. Furthermore, it can increase the retention rate among the mentors (Beltman & Schaeben, 2012).
Therefore, the target groups of this Peer Mentoring project are defined as follows:

- Students with a disability and/or chronic illness in their first and second semester or those re-entering university after a long period of absence
- Students with a disability and/or chronic illness who can provide support as a mentor from the third semester onwards.

Approaches

The project is coordinated by the Department for Equal Opportunities which is in charge of implementing the FernUniversität's inclusion strategy. Peer Mentoring is not compulsory; rather, it is offered as an extracurricular programme with a duration of one semester. The potential participants are invited to apply via an email sent to all enrolled students, and they then attend an online information event in order to ask questions about the project. The project coordinator reviews the applications to clarify whether the programme meets the student's expectations and whether it is fitting to their specific needs and the time they have available (Leidenfrost et al. 2014).

Peer mentoring focuses on planning and organisation in distance learning, taking into account the student's own disability and/or chronic illness. This includes, among other things, finding one's way in the new role as a student, use of the FernUniversität's accessible 'digital campus', applying for aid and compensation for disadvantages, as well as dealing with possible barriers and needs that arise in dealing with fellow students and lecturers. The programme also enables students to discover their own strengths and weaknesses. Schemes to increase motivation and self-confidence as well as the exchange of learning strategies are additional components.

The number of places is limited due to the effort involved in recruiting mentors, selecting applicants, manual matching and the high cost of supporting participants (Sanderson & Chen 2023).

Matching is based on parameters such as field of study, type of disability and/or illness, (anticipated) study-related difficulties and stated interests. Both mentors and mentees take part in a workshop to discuss mentoring, their new role and the opportunities and limitations of the programme. Two mentors are placed in a group with up to five mentees. Each small group then agrees in writing on individual arrangements regarding the scope and content of their collaboration. The initial contact between mentees and mentors is accompanied by a kick-off event. The accompanying project coordinator can support the group promptly in the event of questions and difficulties. In addition, to promote networking, a regular, protected exchange is encouraged, the focus and format of which is devised by the participants. At the end of the semester, a certificate attesting to the skills acquired is issued by studyFIT. The mentors are given the opportunity to take part in a skills-related workshop which is offered subject to demand after surveying the participants.

Outcomes

From the findings of evaluations conducted, it is evident that the participants very much appreciate the Peer Mentoring programme, especially the opportunity to have a safe space where they can share their experiences, assist each other and acquire strategies on coping with difficult situations. A frequently discussed issue is compensation for disadvantages and the question whether or not to disclose the disability or chronic illness. Due to the participation, mentees learn to communicate their needs better, which is helpful for the further course of study.

Both mentees and mentors benefit from participation as both are asked to reflect on how they approach studying and how they deal with the concomitant challenges, that's why the Peer Mentoring is contribution to reduce drop-out.
Launched in 2021, the Peer Mentoring project has yielded a number of lessons to date, namely:

- Peer Mentoring should be adapted to local conditions and involve potential stakeholders (Lindsay et al., 2016).
- The target group and competence goals should be precisely defined.
- Funding for resources should be secured at an early stage.
- Clear agreements within the group of participants, matching and (in consultation with advisory institutions) clarifying the limits of the programme are all important considerations.
- At the application stage, informal communication channels should not be underestimated. There are no preliminary discussions in the current program cycles, but sufficient time should be allowed for this in the event of a resumption.
- It may not be possible to cover all possible needs through peer mentoring, which is why supplementary services for students who have not been placed and ways of dealing with participants' occasional absence should be planned for.

Although studies suggest that a mentoring should last minimum 6 months to have significant impacts, there are a good reason to keep the current design (Lindsay et al., 2016). First, the previous conductions of the peer mentoring indicate that the duration of one semester is in most cases sufficient to build strong relationships between mentees and mentors outlast the end of the official phase accompanied by university staff. Second, the chosen duration is an advantage regarding the recruitment of new mentors. As the mentors themselves are studying with disabilities and/or chronical illnesses a commitment for one semester can be more often carried out than a one-year mentoring. Nonetheless, many of the mentors have been participated twice or even more times and mentees quite frequently become mentors in later semesters.

As the programme has had very positive effects in terms of community building, academic integration and retention, in the next semesters the approach will be applied to further target groups such as first-generation students, students with care responsibilities and students with vocational qualifications.

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Good Practice #14

ESPRIA Project: Improving First-Year Student Mentoring

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This Good practice presents an institutional intervention carried out with the objective of improving the experience of first-year undergraduate students at the Universitat Oberta de Catalunya.
The principal aim is to enhance students' academic achievement and, consequently, bolster their retention in degree programs by promoting their adherence to the educational model's learning methodology, which is centred on continuous evaluation. After observing a positive impact on all performance indicators and a net increase in second semester enrolment in the participating programmes, the institution decided to extend ESPRIA intervention to the regular management of bachelor degrees.

Introduction

The ESPRIA project (improving First-Year Student Mentoring, ESPRIA for its initials in catalan), aimed at supporting first-year students at the Universitat Oberta de Catalunya (UOC) and reducing dropout rates in online degree programs, focuses on improving integration into the university environment. This institutional intervention emphasises flexibility for students with personal or work commitments, streamlining the enrolment process and enhancing subject offerings. Furthermore, the project underscores the importance of evidence-based evaluation through learning analytics.

Led by the UOC's eLearning Innovation Center, the project involved 10 degree programs, coordinating efforts among directors, professors, and tutors. It impacted 7,289 newly enrolled students during the 2018-2019 academic year. After the results of the evaluation, it has been integrated into the managing processes for the first enrolment for the UOC bachelor's degree programs, involving 22 programs, 181 subjects, and 134 professors during the academic year 2023-2024.

ESPRIA builds upon previous UOC initiatives, aiming to standardise previous strategies for dropout reduction and improve the teaching and learning model. The intervention promotes four main goals:

a) Meeting student expectations (number of subjects passed in relation to those they were enrolled).
b) The improvement of the academic experience of students by offering a structured enrolment itinerary based on subject packages.
c) The coordination of all the actors involved in student support: academic departments, professors responsible for the subjects, academic guidance service, tutors, and affiliated teachers.

Challenges

Reducing dropout rates in higher education is a critical concern for institutions due to its personal,

institutional, and societal implications, along with the substantial associated costs. Various reports from national and international bodies underscore the significance of this issue, including those from the *Agència per a la Qualitat del Sistema Universitari de Catalunya* (2010), the Conference of Rectors of Spanish Universities (2018), and the European Commission (2015).
In the context of online university studies, research by Lee and Choi (2011), echoed by Bawa (2016), identifies key factors contributing to dropout, such as students' misconceptions about online learning and time management challenges. Xavier and Meneses (2018) emphasise the pivotal role of time, considering factors like course load, total workload, and calendar synchronisation between subjects.

Lee and Choi (2011) and Grau-Valldosera et al. (2018) highlight three categories of factors influencing dropout: personal, institutional, and contextual. Personal factors encompass students' academic background, online experience, and psychological attributes. Institutional factors include course design, support mechanisms, and interactions between stakeholders. Contextual factors relate to students' professional and personal circumstances.

Interventions to reduce dropout should prioritise improving course design and providing personalised support to students. Quality educational offerings and tailored monitoring can mitigate dropout risks (Mor et al., 2007). Dropout often occurs in the first year, particularly at the UOC, reflecting a mismatch between students' expectations and the educational model. This underscores the importance of interventions targeting first-year students.

Approaches

The ESPRIA project aims to improve the academic experience of newly enrolled students during their first year at the university, focusing all efforts on increasing student persistence in degree programs. To do this, it develops a set of coordinated actions among the different stakeholders involved, seeking to improve the support provided to students when formalising their first enrolment, as well as during the academic period covering the first two semesters.

All measures adopted within the framework of this intervention were designed and implemented in collaboration with the university's management, program directors, professors responsible for subjects, student tutors, and the pedagogical support team of the eLearning Innovation Center. Succinctly, and always placing the improvement of the experience of newly enrolled students at the centre of decisions, the intervention was concretised in the following actions:

a) Creation of enrolment pathways: in order to facilitate the incorporation of students into the programmes and to maintain one of the institutional aims centred on flexibility and freedom of choice of subjects, the programme directors defined three enrolment packages containing three subjects, thus offering a total of 9 subjects per degree programme. Since the standard enrolment of UOC students is between two and three subjects per semester, but there is also a growing number of students who are more dedicated, this approach allows flexibility to meet both rates of dedication. Likewise, given that students enter the university via different access routes, some packages have been designed to cater for specific profiles such as those coming from vocational training or those aiming to finish studies started previously.

b) Assessment of workload, learning resources required, and proposed learning activities: professors responsible for the subjects included in the packages of each degree program reviewed and adjusted their subjects to ensure correspondence between the time required to complete it and the credit assigned.
c) Allowing more flexibility of the assessment model: this measure aims to avoid the withdrawal of continuous assessment when students find it difficult to make progress in overcoming the proposed activities. In this sense, the professors chose those measures that best suited their assessment model, the type of activities proposed or the learning objectives. Among other measures, it can be mentioned the incorporation of remedial activities, flexibilising submission dates, or the establishment of an additional final synthesis activity.
d) Synchronisation of deadlines for the submission of continuous assessment activities: with the aim of reducing conflicts between the delivery of activities between the different subjects taken, a shared calendar was agreed for the delivery of the continuous assessment activities of the subjects that form part of each package, ensuring sufficient spacing between them and, as far as possible, avoiding the coincidence of delivery dates.
e) Improvement of the tutoring process: since tutors are the academic figure who individually welcome, accompany, and guide students during their incorporation into the studies at the UOC, they are a key element in the implementation of the intervention. Tutors must assess all aspects involved in the decision-making process regarding the first enrolment, taking into account the availability of study time, interests, needs, expectations, and previous knowledge of the students.

Outcomes

During the analysis of the pilot intervention, it was observed that, in general terms, students who decided to participate achieved a higher degree of success in continuous assessment and overall subject completion compared to students who did not participate in the intervention. Specifically, during the second semester of the 2017-2018 academic year, the pass rates were 69.8% for students solely enrolled in ESPRIA, compared to 62.68% for those not enrolled in ESPRIA. Similarly, during the first trimester of the 2018-2019 academic year, the pass rates were 67.24% for students following ESPRIA recommendations, compared to 55.05% for those not enrolled in ESPRIA.

Regarding re-enrollment, a relationship was observed between persistence and workload. Students who commenced their degree studies following their tutors' recommendations and enrolled in recommended subjects demonstrated a higher re-enrollment rate during their second semester compared to those who did not follow these recommendations. This trend was particularly evident among UOC undergraduate students studying part-time and thus enrolling in two additional subjects each semester, with approximately a 10% higher re-enrollment rate favouring students who enrolled in subjects included in the ESPRIA compared to those who did not.

A study was conducted to explore students' perceptions of the ESPRIA project, emphasizing qualitative aspects from participants' viewpoints (Xavier et al.,2020). Eight first-year, fully online undergraduate UOC students who had persisted for three consecutive semesters were included. The study identified differing

perceptions among student profiles regarding ESPRIA measures (e.g., part-time students valued flexibility, while full-time students faced procrastination issues). It concluded that tailored support measures are essential to address the diverse needs among student profiles.

As the ESPRIA project demonstrated a positive impact on all performance indicators (e.g., student achievement, subject completion, and student persistence) and resulted in net enrollment growth in the second semester in the participating programs, the UOC has integrated the intervention into the enrollment and academic orientation processes of the all its degree programs.

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Good Practice #15

Improving retention through assessment

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Assessment plays a key role in student retention. It both supports and measures learning.
The Assessment Programme at The Open University has been working to address the issue of 'single points of failure' as one approach to improving student retention, continuation and performance. Single points of failure are defined as an assessment point which results in an automatic fail for the student if they do not meet the required criteria or mark.
This case study presents assessment strategy reviews at The Open University, initiated by the Assessment Programme, that have resulted in changes to assessment policy and processes to ensure that we remain a world-leader in distance education and bring our practice in line with the sector.

Introduction

As a distance learning, open entry institution, The Open University is unique. Many students study alongside additional responsibilities and are returning to study after a prolonged period of time. University assessment strategies have been premised on the need to operate at scale, reflect the demands of a diverse range of academic programmes and to support a very diverse student body. The role of assessment in supporting student success expands across induction, continuation, completion and progression supporting students to achieve their study goals and often go beyond. Each Faculty is empowered to develop their assessment strategies and the decision on the number and types of assessment is historically unique to the module.

Challenges

The primary challenges addressed by changes to assessment are focussed on student outcomes when the strategies are varied: consistency in the student experience, transparency of assessment requirements and processes and alignment with the Sector to ensure student success. Due to the unique nature of OU study, challenges presented by our frameworks and internal process and procedures also need to be addressed. One unintended consequence of some assessment strategies has been the creation of single points of failure at module level. A single point of failure is an assessment point which results in an automatic fail for the student. This issue is being addressed in the examples below.

Approaches

Led by the Pro Vice Chancellor-Students and managed by the Assessment Programme, projects are initiated when institutional data and where possible, qualitative data from students, suggests that there is an issue which needs addressing. The development of any project draws on previous research and scholarship, where possible. The majority of assessment projects and activities are managed by an assessment representative and Academic Lead drawn from the faculties. A 'Task and Finish Group', comprising of key stakeholders with particular expertise and who can advise on implementation, progress

the work and reports through governance. This will also include, where possible, representation of the student voice to engage and ensure we work in partnership with our students. Where evidence of impact is required to facilitate OU wide roll-out, any initiatives are piloted and evaluated using out develop evaluation of impact framework established within the context of our student outcomes work.

The following projects address assessment points in the order a student would experience them; from assessment design, to module assessment and end of module assessment.

Weightings and Thresholds

The use of weightings and thresholds in assessment ensure that learning outcomes are met before a student progresses to the next stage of their module or qualification. However, there is a difference in approaches between Faculties. A high threshold on single or multiple assignments can lead to students failing the module and impact their decision to continue with their studies, both on that module and with the university, particularly in their first year. The Weightings and Thresholds project has been designed to encourage the review and amendment of module assessment strategies. The work builds on recommendations that the use of thresholds should be carefully considered and only used if pedagogically justified. Weightings on assessment tasks should be considered as the primary strategy to mark the importance of an assessment item and thresholds should only be introduced when absolutely necessary (e.g. in order to meet the requirements of external Professional Statutory and Regulatory Bodies). Guidance has been produced and a module assessment design workshops outline established principles and good practice around the effective use of weightings and thresholds to improve the student experience as well as continuation and completion rates.

Reassessment

It is common practice in the sector to offer students a chance to resubmit a failed assessment where they have not been able to demonstrate particular learning outcomes and that results in them not passing the module. In almost all OUUK modules, students have previously been able to resubmit their end of module tutor marked assignment (where the weighting is 30% or more), end of module assessment or exam, but have not been permitted to resubmit any of their tutor-marked assignments. A new policy has been approved to offer students who have a 'low score' where the reassessment weighting is 30% or less to resubmit their tutor- marked assignment to improve the overall score and support student success through higher pass rates, increased student continuation and completion. Evaluation of twelve early-adopter modules of the policy showed that 94% of resubmitting students went on to pass the module. Further training is proposed to increase the awareness of the policy.

Resit and Resubmission

Where students have failed and are eligible to resit or resubmit their final end of module assessment , end of module tutor marked assignment or exam, it has been recognised that there is room for improving our communications and support to students. Based on evidence (from 18/19-21/22), 4,528 students were eligible for a resit and resubmission opportunity, but only approximately 50-52% took up the opportunity. Of those that did, 71-79% passed. A revision of the resit and resubmission approach is currently in progress and is proposing more supportive communications and follow-up activities in order to increase uptake and

pass rates. This approach will be tested through a pilot exercise that will allow the University to identify best practice and amend its assessment support accordingly.

Break in Study

Students who need to take a break, whatever the reason, have the opportunity to do so at any point in their study. However, assessment banking, an option available for students to pause their learning and return without losing the credit already achieved, is not always the best option for most students: only around 20-30% of students who defer with assessment banking return and complete their module. This compares to the 60-70% of students who defer without assessment banking, return and complete their module. Additionally, assessment banking has particularly poor outcomes for students who are at an earlier stage in their studies or defer early on in their module. The OU assessment banking policy and process was amended to ensure that discussion with a Student Support Team member, specifically a Senior Advisor/Educational Advisor, would determine if assessment banking was most appropriate for the student and their situation, or if an alternative path would be more suitable. The decision still rests with the student, but they are supported and empowered by information to help them. Additional improvements to the process of returning to study, such as continuity of tutor, where possible, were made to support student retention and ensure student success.

Outcomes

The Assessment Programme works with key stakeholders from across the institution to ensure we are prioritising initiatives that will improve student outcomes and reduce inequalities. We are governed by and report to the PVC-S Student Outcomes Portfolio. Assessment projects result in changes made to either OU policy, processes and practices and a close down report is produced following each initiative to review if the scope and success criteria has been met and where an impact analysis is agreed, the project is evaluated over time.

The Assessment Programme engages with the wider OU community through workshops. Providing opportunity and space for discussion, sharing of expertise and experience and inviting external guest speakers to our events has built an assessment community of practice, which is engaged and motivated to make and implement change. This ensures our work continues beyond discreet project work and the incremental changes that contribute to student success continue to make an impact.

It also presents opportunities for colleagues outside of the small Assessment Programme team to be involved in assessment change and the leadership of future initiatives. These colleagues provide additional context and insight to the changes that will impact student retention, progression and success.

Good Practice #16

Study workshops within the Bachelor of Laws degree programme

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The study workshops “In iure” are aimed at students who either did not pass or did not attend the examinations in the first modules of the Bachelor of Laws. It is an innovative holistic approach and consists of asynchronous and synchronous formats addressing both subject-related competences as well as general study skills. The participants learn foundational techniques which are not only required for the course in Civil Law, but are also the basis for a successful career in every legal field. The positive impact that the workshops have on both the students’ overall achievement and on other measures of student satisfaction is shown by the outcomes of subsequent assessments and also from student feedback.

Introduction

In 2019 the Faculty of Law at the FernUniversität in Hagen set up a new support programme aimed at students at the beginning of the second semester in the Bachelor of Laws. The decision was made in the light of a significant number of students who barely pass or even fail the examinations in the first modules – Civil Law and a Foundation course. In order to support such students in anticipation of the examinations at the end of the second semester, an invitation to study workshops is issued. Participation is recommended but is not compulsory. Nonetheless, the participation rate is high and many students take advantage of the programme resulting in better marks, most of them passing the supplementary exam successfully. The workshops are conducted by a faculty member for whom the “In iure” programme is a priority.

Challenges

The reasons for failing the examinations in the first Legal module are manifold, but in general a lack of knowledge of how to self-organise and learn, as well as an incomplete understanding of foundational legal techniques and not knowing how to write a legal expert report, can be seen as the main stumbling blocks. Furthermore, academic enculturation is challenging due to the high number of students enrolled at the Faculty of Law and their diverse backgrounds such as different education levels or previous training in subjects other than law.

Approaches

Students who have not passed the first examinations are informed about the “In iure” programme via email or directly in meetings with the student counsellors, and they are invited to participate in the study workshops during their second semester. Participation is recommended but not compulsory. Students who have passed the examinations – meaning they have attained more than 54 % of the maximum score

– are not permitted to participate due to the limited capacity. The “In iure” programme is conducted by one faculty member, Christina Gelinski.

As the reasons for poor performance in the first modules are often manifold, the study workshops address subject-related competences as well as general study-related skills. For instance, self-organisation is a crucial skill and challenge, especially for students with professional and family duties. The programme reflects these special framework conditions by combining asynchronous and synchronous learning.

In order to give students the high flexibility they need, the general study skills are addressed through a digital learning environment. Different interactive learning materials such as quizzes and assignments focusing on self-organisation, psychosocial wellbeing and media competence are available in Moodle. Due to the fact that some of the participants do not lack such skills, for instance because they have previously studied at another university, not all of the learning activities are mandatory. In fact, the students receive recommendations regarding the content they should focus on.

Alongside general study-related skills, academic orientation for legal studies is another core component of the asynchronous learning aspect. Students learn how to conduct literature research, how to use subject-specific databanks and how to conduct legal work, such as finding and applying the right paragraphs and writing legal briefs. In case of questions, students may contact the programme manager and instructor Christina Gelinski, who is also a student counsellor at the Faculty of Law.

This self-paced learning prepares the students for the synchronous meetings which include, on the one hand, crash courses with between 20 and 50 participants, and on the other hand meetings in which case studies are explored in depth. Both formats are carried out via Zoom. In the crash courses the programme manager presents different legal issues and legal disputes pertaining to fields covered in the first semester modules. In this context, typical errors in legal texts are discussed and solutions are also sketched.

In comparison, the case studies meetings are more interactive. Organised as small group meetings with 4-10 participants, they cover how to write legal expert reports, opinions and briefs based on different legal cases introduced by the instructor. As such, students are given a fictitious case which they have to prepare for the meeting, which entails reading the case and considering the solution. During the meeting the instructor moderates the discussion between the students, asks questions related to the case and helps to resolve the case appropriately. The discussion is accompanied by a PowerPoint presentation in which the complete solution is progressively revealed. The presentation is sent to the participants afterwards, meaning that they need not take notes during the discussion.

Outcomes

Since the launch in 2019 more than 1.000 students have participated in the “In iure” workshops. On average the programme attracts 140 participants per semester. Regular evaluation shows that a high percentage of students assess the programme in a very positive light. Asked about the impact on their own academic enculturation, about 70 percent of the participants see very positive effects and another 27 percent see somewhat positive effects. Even more positive feedback is given on the academic aspects, such as how to conduct online research and how to use law-focused databanks. More than 80 percent

assess the value as very high. The great impact the programme has had on student success is evident when considering the assignment and examination outcomes. In Civil Law, “In Iure” participants perform significantly better in 3 out of the 4 assignments that serve as a prerequisite for exam attendance. In the Foundation course they on average outperform non-participants in both of the prerequisite assignments. The pattern is even more pronounced in the actual examinations. While on average “In Iure” participants pass the examinations in Civil Law and in the Foundation course, non-participants on average have significantly lower marks or do not pass. Taking these positive effects into account, in 20232? the decision was made that the study workshops support students in terms of two further modules, constitutional law and criminal law, (which ones) of the entrance phase of the Bachelor of Laws. Students can only participate in the latter, if they have completed the mentioned modules; if there a too few students who fulfil the request, only constitutional or criminal law or neither of them is being offered during the very semester.

Contributing Institutions

European Association of Distance Teaching Universities (EADTU) | The Netherlands
Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia (UNED) | Spain
University of Jyväskylä (JYU) | Finland
Universitat Oberta de Catalunya (UOC) | Spain
The Open University (OUUK)| The United Kingdom
FernUniversität in Hagen (FernUni) | Germany
Anadolu University | Turkey

Published by EADTU, 2024

DOI: **10.5281/zenodo.11120440**

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