'I am still studying, I just have not finished' — research into the reasons for student non-completion at OTEN-DE

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ABSTRACT

OTEN-DE, like other educational providers has long been concerned with their student attrition rates. Distance education providers traditionally have higher non-completion rates than their face-to-face counterparts and this is of some concern as one of the key performance indicators for VET providers now include module completion and non-completion rates.

Changes in federal and state educational policy have resulted in a very competitive educational marketplace, where providers vie with each other for students and resources in an increasingly stringent fiscal environment.

This research project was designed primarily to identify the factors which cause OTEN-DE students to effectively 'drop-out' and not complete their course/modules after enrolling and receiving their learning materials.

This paper reports on the findings of a survey of a sample of 'non-working' and 'barely' working students who enrolled at OTEN-DE in 1999.

INTRODUCTION

Snapshot of OTEN-DE

OTEN-DE is part of the NSW Education and Training portfolio specialising in distance and flexible delivery of vocational education and training programs for NSW TAFE, industry and schools.

OTEN-DE is the largest provider of distance and flexible vocational education and training programs in Australia with 33,000 students enrolled in over 800 fully accredited subjects and modules. There are approximately 250 courses offered - ranging from traditional business and marketing courses, engineering, building, information technology to beekeeping, optical dispensing, maritime engineering, fire fighting and horticulture.

At the time of the survey, OTEN's Open Learning Program was organised in the following four Faculties, Access Programs (e.g. pre-vocational subjects, HSC), Business Services (e.g. marketing, real estate, accounting), Service Industries (e.g. information technology, horticulture, environmental subjects, hospitality) and Production Industries (e.g. engineering, building, maritime studies, fire technology)

Student attrition rates in Distance Education

Student attrition is of special concern to distance educators because it is generally acknowledged that the rate of attrition is higher than that for face-to-face education providers. Case and Elliot (1997) state that student attrition is the major problem facing higher education institutions today, particularly distance education providers. Significant numbers of students who commence studying distance courses fail to complete them Thompson (1984). Rates of drop-out in distance education vary anywhere from 30% to 70% Garrison (1987).

Zajkowski (1997) gives an indication that average completion rates of distance students are evenly distributed between 29% and 68%. However, it is difficult to compare figures for different institutions, due to differences in how institutions calculate completion rates, and the differing nature of enrolment, support and assessment arrangements.

Within the NSW TAFE system OTEN-DE's module completion rate is traditionally lower than other on-campus Institute providers.

Factors affecting student non-completion

There is quite a considerable body of research on issues which affect students persistence in a distance education mode. Robinson (1981) refers to problems of time management, lack of study skills, feelings of isolation, alienation and a range of personal issues such as family commitments. Edge (1982) suggested that non-persistence resulted largely from 'life factors' which affected students and therefore outside the control of institution. Keegan (1986, p174) identified the 'pull' and 'push' factors in relation to student drop-out. A 'pull' factor is one which draws the student away from the course, such as change of job, personal reasons etc. They are external to the institution and are therefore outside the control of the institution. A 'push' factor relates to matters 'internal' to an institution such as their teaching practices, course materials etc. which can negatively affect student continuation. These 'internal' factors are able to be controlled and modified by the institution.

Couts (1994, p89) suggested 'many students withdraw for personally positive reasons such as beginning a new job or the opportunity for further training in the course of their choice'. Brindley (1988) demonstrated that both completing and non-completing distance education students experience similar negative/positive experiences during study. Garland (1993) took this further to conclude that the decision to persist or not to persist, is an idiosyncratic one, depending on the interpretation of that experience by the individual in their particular environment.

Couts (1994) maintains that identifying the cause of drop-out is difficult, given the complexity of the facts involved, but nevertheless advocates the importance for institutions to investigate the causes of student attrition in their institutions and develop their own institutional policies and strategies to minimise attrition rates. This is the reason why this particular research was undertaken at OTEN-DE.

There are various approaches which can be taken to look for explanations for attrition in distance education. Researchers have looked at profiles of their students to identify factors for 'at risk' students; others have looked at their courses to identify the features which are associated with high completion rates. Another approach, and one which has been taken by OTEN-DE, is to ask the students themselves for the reasons behind their decision not to complete their course/modules.

RESEARCH PROJECT

The aim of this research project was to identify the factors which cause OTEN-DE students to effectively 'drop-out' and not complete their course/modules, after enrolling and receiving their learning materials.

Specific objectives

1. Determine the relative importance of the following eight factors in the students decision not to complete their studies:

    - employment
    - family or personal reasons
    - change to another study option
    - course delivery
    - problems with teachers and/or assignments
    - course content and/or materials,
    - feelings of confidence or motivation
    - study by distance mode

2. Determine the students expectations on enrolment

3. Determine at what point the students decided not to proceed with their studies

4. Determine whether the student thought OTEN-DE could/should have done more to assist them to complete their studies

5. Determine whether the student would consider studying with OTEN-DE in the future

6.   Obtain general feedback about OTEN-DE

7.   Acquire insight into the particular mix of internal/external factors which contribute to student drop-
     out at OTEN.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Population

The population was defined as all OTEN-DE students newly enrolled in 1999 who, by the end of
October 1999, had submitted one or no assignments for the whole of their course. The population
excluded the following:

- re-enrolled students
- all commercial courses and two literacy courses
- courses which did not require assignments
- students living outside NSW/ACT
- students who had already formally withdrawn from their course
- students who had submitted more than one assignment for their whole course

A population of 8997 students matched the above criteria.

Sample

A random sample of 3000 (roughly 1/3) stratified by Faculty was selected for study. 70 (2.3%) of the
sample were found to be in Corrective Services Institutions and were excluded from the survey as
they could not be contacted.

Survey Method

A questionnaire was designed to measure the relative importance of the above factors. The
respondents were asked to nominate the main reasons which influenced them in deciding not to
complete their course/modules. Respondents were free to nominate more than one factor if
appropriate.

Both mail and telephone survey methods were used to administer the questionnaire to the sample.
OTEN-DE sent out 1565 surveys by mail to Business and Services Industries students and 1365
students from Access Faculty and Production Industries had the survey delivered by a Telemarketing
company whose staff had been well briefed

RESULTS

In total the survey had a 26% return rate, 765 responses. The mail survey had a 22% return rate, the
telephone, a 33% return rate. 22% for a mail survey is low, but is fairly typical of questionnaire return
rates in distance education research. Neuman (1997) states that a response rate of 10% to 50% is
common for a mail survey of distance education students. With the phone survey, only 33% of the
students were able to be contacted (numbers disconnected, answering machines, students moved
on). Only 31% of those contacted resulted in valid surveys.

Despite the low return rate, it can be argued that the profile of the survey respondents matched the
profile of the sample for gender, qualifications gained since school, employment status, disability,
Aboriginal or Torres Islander and Austudy. The Business Services Faculty was slightly under
represented, the Access Programs Faculty slightly over represented. Data on age and geographic
location for the sample is currently not available, however they do match the profile of the typical
OTEN student. The data for age and geographic location for respondents was 42% in the range 25-39
years, 53% of respondents were from the Metropolitan area, 43% from the country and 4% other. The
majority of students were English speaking for both sample and survey respondents.* * *

SUMMARY OF RESEARCH RESULTS

For the eight factors relating to reasons for non-completion of course/modules:

1. 45% of respondents cited job related reasons
2. 56% of respondents cited family or personal reasons
3. 19% of respondents cited changing to another study option
4. 19% of respondents cited reasons related to course content/materials
5. 11% of respondents cited reasons related to course delivery /administration
6. 10% of respondents cited reasons related to problems with teachers and/or assignments
7. 25% of respondents cited reasons related to confidence and motivation
8. 20% of respondents cited reasons related to studying by distance mode

For information relating to studying with OTEN-DE

- 87% of respondents enrolled with the goal of finishing the course
- 18% of respondents thought OTEN-DE could/should have done something which would have assisted them to continue
- 91% of respondents would consider studying at OTEN-DE in the future
- 42% of respondents stated they were intending to finish their course.

KEY FINDINGS

1. Job Related Reasons

45% of respondents stated that the reasons for non-completion related to their job (n=765, m=13). 29% stated they found their job too demanding of their time. 53% of males, compared to 39% of females cited job-related reasons which is statistically significant at 0.005 level.

QUALITATIVE DATA
There were 114 written responses to this question. Approximately 20% of the respondents gave 'personally positive reasons' for non-completion e.g:

> I moved into a supervisory role. I am now interested in doing an HR/Supervisor Managers course through OTEN-DE.
> I went from p/t to f/t and then got a promotion.

The majority of the others explained difficulties associated with their jobs

> My job was too stressful, and I was too tired to study my course when I had free time.
> I work at three jobs.

2. Family or Personal Reasons

56% of respondents cited family/personal reasons for non-completion (n=765, m=17). 44% of males compared to 64% of females cited family/personal reasons. There is a statistically significant relationship between these two variables. 33% of respondents who answered yes to reasons related to family/personal, also answered yes to reasons related to job. 59% of respondents who answered no to reasons related to family/personal answered yes to reasons related to job. 41% said no to both job and family/personal reasons

QUALITATIVE DATA
There were 187 written responses to this question and the majority were associated with the areas of 'major life changes' which ranged from domestic violence, death of family members, weddings, pregnancies, births, marriage breakups, moving house, accidents, gender reassignment, major illnesses, custody battles over children.

3. A change from OTEN-DE to another Study Option

19% of respondents nominated this as the reason for non-completion (n=765, m=4). 10% of respondents stated that they had changed to a TAFE face-to-face college.

There were 80 written responses to this question. 25% of responses were about changing from OTEN-DE to face-to-face mode at their local TAFE college, 13% of responses indicated that students were doing a university course, sometimes at the same time as an OTEN-DE course, 8% of responses indicated students were co-enrolled with OTEN-DE and their local TAFE and a small percentage of students were returning to school or taking up traineeships.

4. Reasons relating to the way the course was delivered/administered/run by OTEN-DE

11% of respondents nominated reasons for non-completion related to the way the course was delivered by OTEN-DE (n=744, m=21).

QUALITATIVE DATA
There were 57 written responses to the question. Approximately 35% of the responses were related to learning materials arriving late, materials missing. Other responses covered difficulties getting textbooks on interlibrary loan, problems with recognition of prior learning for subjects/experience.

5. Reasons relating to problems with teachers/assignments

10% of respondents nominated reasons related to problems with teachers and/or assignments for non-completion (n=744, m=21).

QUALITATIVE DATA
There were 43 written responses to this question. 28% of the responses related to problems with assignments, too long, too hard, difficulties with deadlines. 40% of the responses related to difficulties with contacting teachers.

6. Reasons relating to course content/materials

19% responded yes to this question (n=742, m=25). 8% stated the course was too hard and 5% stated it was not what they expected. 4% stated that the course materials were too overwhelming.

QUALITATIVE DATA
There were 62 written responses to this question. The responses ranged over all aspects of course content. Some examples are:

> I found the course too hard to read. Too much tertiary jargon without a page for dictionary.
> The course was too easy.

7. Reasons Relating to Confidence/Motivation

25% of respondents nominated this as a main reason for non-completion (n=741, m=24). 14% of respondents stated they had difficulty organising their time.

16% of males answered yes to this question compared to 31% females, there is a significant relationship between gender and feelings relating to confidence/motivation

8. Reasons Relating to Studying by Distance

20% of the respondents stated that the reasons for non-completion related to studying by distance (n=734, m=31). 13% of respondents stated that they missed staff/student interaction.

Of the 80% who stated that non-completion did *not* relate to studying by distance, 70% (approx. 400 responses) stated positively that distance study suited their lifestyle (n=765, n/a 199).

STUDENTS EXPECTATIONS ON ENROLLING
87% stated their goal was to finish the course on enrolling (n=753, m=12). 14% stated they thought distance education would be easier than face-to-face courses.

AT WHAT POINT DID THE STUDENT DECIDE NOT TO PROCEED WITH THE COURSE?
18% stated they decided not to proceed when they first received their learning materials (n=742, although the majority of respondents preferred to answer this question as a written response. There were 399 responses, and most referred back to the answer they had given in the first part of the questionnaire ie job, personal/family etc.

IS THERE ANYTHING THAT YOU CONSIDER OTEN-DE COULD/SHOULD HAVE DONE WHICH WOULD HAVE ASSISTED YOU TO CONTINUE YOUR COURSE?
18% of students responded yes to this question (n=727, m=38)

QUALITATIVE DATA
There were 141 written responses to this question. Approximately 25% were concerned with how to improve communication and feedback with teachers, other responses requested clearer information and reminders about when work is due, more time to complete course, help in getting textbooks.

Some examples of responses:
> If students don't hand in assignments it would be great if OTEN-DE could give us a call and see if there are any problems.
> Internet interaction with students and staff.
> Motivate students. Have a hotline or something like that.

WOULD YOU CONSIDER STUDYING AT OTEN-DE IN THE FUTURE?
91% of respondents answered yes (n=727, m=38)

ANY FURTHER COMMENTS YOU WOULD LIKE TO MAKE
This was by far the most popular open question drawing 453 responses.

- 42% of respondents expressed the desire to enrol again in 2000 and continue their course:
  > I am not dropping out of the course, I still have time to complete it and I will be continuing in the New Year. I really enjoy it.
  > Am re-enrolling now that commitments (family and work) have eased. I am still doing it.

- 13% of respondents indicated that they would like to continue studying at a later date:
  > Great course, would like to consider doing it in the future.
  > When my life settles down again I might try the course again as it seemed really good.

- 13% of respondents made positive statements /remarks about their study experience with OTEN-DE:
  > I was very happy with the whole structure of the course and felt the support was there if needed, it was just a lack of time on my part.
  > I found the material comprehensive and easy to follow. The staff that I spoke to were also helpful and friendly.

- 10% of respondents stated they would not be finishing the course with OTEN-DE, some of these students were transferring to face-to-face TAFE courses, some were simply changing to a different course:
  > I think I will enrol in a part-time course at TAFE next year to complete this course.
  > The teachers were excellent. I just found the course too hard, plus having a new baby. Hope to do another course next year.

- 4% of respondents commented negatively about their experience with OTEN-DE:
  > I was told this course was for those who had never used a computer before. This course is not designed for such a person ... I believe I was misled by your pamphlet.

- The remaining 18% of comments were mainly about why the student didn't finish the course.

DISCUSSION

The results of the survey indicate that at OTEN-DE, non-completion of course/modules is strongly associated with the 'external' factors of family/personal and job related reasons (56% of respondents cited family/personal reasons, and 45% job related reasons). These are considered to be outside the immediate control of the institution. It is interesting to compare these findings with a similar study by Brown (1996) into the role of internal and external factors in the discontinuation of off-campus students at Deakin University. The study found that factors 'internal' to the university were cited as major reasons for discontinuance - insufficient support from tutors and difficulties contacting tutors (67%). Brown also found that even for those students who discontinued primarily for family and/or employment reasons, the problems with tutor interactions remained important factors. This was not found to be the case in the OTEN-DE study, external reasons for non-completion (family and/or

employment reasons) were not strongly associated with internal (problems with teachers, course content) reasons.

The tension, which sometimes exists in defining a successful outcome for both the student and the institution, is evident in the responses to the question about reasons for non-completion relating to job. 20% of written responses to this question were examples of Couts' (1994) 'personally positive reasons' why students do not complete - i.e. job promotion, change of job requiring a change of course. The institution is left with an uncompleted module, but the student has achieved the outcome they required.

This is also the case with another external factor which 19% of respondents cited as a reason for non-completion - the change from OTEN-DE to another study option. Failure to complete a course at a particular institution need not mean failure to gain a qualification elsewhere. 10% of respondents stated they were changing from OTEN-DE to a face-to-face TAFE college. This is not necessarily something that OTEN-DE can do anything about - there are a number of students who do discover that distance study is not for them. In fact, the survey showed that there were 20% of respondents who cited studying by distance mode as a reason for non-completion. Half of those respondents also stated that they changed to another study option. Of the other 80% respondents who did not find studying by distance a reason for non-completion, 70% stated categorically that distance study suited their lifestyle.

25% of respondents cited reasons related to confidence and motivation and this was the third highest response rate for non-completion of the eight factors. On the face of it, one might expect this factor to be external to an institution, however, OTEN-DE has started implementing strategies aimed at enhancing and facilitating positive interaction between students and teachers.

In the written responses to the question relating to confidence and motivation, and also the question relating to whether OTEN-DE could or should have done something which would have assisted completion, students invariably asked for more structure in their course e.g. written deadlines for assignments, phone reminders, work timetables etc. This highlights the paradox of flexible delivery, which is, that while some students are drawn to this mode of delivery, they may not have the skills to successfully handle it. However, OTEN-DE certainly provides a supportive framework of skills and student support for those who require it, and will investigate further augmenting this area.

The survey also found that the number of students citing problems with course content/materials, teachers and/or assignments and course delivery as reasons relating to non-completion, were relatively low compared to the other external factors. The highest response rate for non-completion was 19% for reasons related to course content and/or materials. All three questions had over 80% of respondents stating that this was not the reason for non-completion. The reason for this could also be that many students just did not get far enough into their studies to make any judgments in this area. Nevertheless, OTEN-DE's future strategies to reduce student non-completion rates will be well informed by this research.

The finding from the survey concerning the information relating to students' experience studying with OTEN-DE was very positive. 91% of respondents stated that they would consider studying at OTEN-DE in the future and the written responses to the last open question on any other comments you would like to make, 42% of students stated they were intending to re-enrol and finish their course in 2000 - hence the title of this paper - 'I am still studying, I just have not finished', a comment from one of the students which seemed to capture the optimism which was evident in the responses to this question.

The next phase of the research project will be to undertake further analysis of the sample, particularly the profile of the students who did not respond to the survey. Further research will be carried out on the 1999 sample of non-completing students to find out how many students did in fact re-enrol and complete their course/modules.

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