Chapter III

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

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ABSTRACT

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

INTRODUCTION

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

The availability of an online learning facilitator to support distance learning may address aspects such as student motivation and unit completion (London, 2004), and could contribute to student retention. This chapter will provide a brief outline of elements that can be identified in an online tutorial (facilitation) system to help improve retention rates for distance learners.

OVERVIEW OF THE CHAPTER

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

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

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

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

**BACKGROUND**

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

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

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

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