Chapter 11
Holistic Perspective on Student Retention: Focus Master’s Programmes

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ABSTRACT

Student retention is becoming critical as the budgets for higher education are shrinking and the economies are becoming more and more knowledge driven. Student retention if not addressed in a holistic manner would mean loss not only to the institution but also to the development of human resources and equitable economic development. This chapter intends to review the causes of student dropout, the current approaches adopted for retaining students with focus on master level programmes in management discipline at a Namibian University. In doing so it also addresses the socio-cultural aspects of student retention and intends to provide a holistic framework for enhancing the rate of student retention.

INTRODUCTION

The current interest in student retention has occurred in a climate where higher education has moved to a massified system with fewer resources to support more students. Chen et al. (2008) argue that academic success which underpins student retention requires more than acquisition of knowledge, and that the classroom is an important introductory point for helping students to begin to master key disciplinary concepts. In support of this, Meyer and Land (2005) put forward the pivotal role of students’ understandings of what they call disciplinary threshold concepts for academic survival and success. The implication here is that the classroom needs to include active and interactive learning as the basis for developing an understanding of core disciplinary concepts. These core disciplinary concepts underpin academic success and have strong implications for student retention. There is thus a ‘dynamic interplay’ (Brysen and Hand, 2007) between student engagement, the quality of student learning and the teaching and learning context. In support of this view, Chen et al. (2008) identify engagement as being composed of the two aspects of, the degree of time and effort that students put into their education, but also the

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‘way an institution organises learning opportunities and services’ (Chen et al, 2008, p. 340) so as to encourage students to take part in and thus benefit from the institution’s various learning activities. The curriculum in a broad sense, or the teaching and learning programme, provides an ideal forum for approaches and strategies that encourage students to engage, as it is experienced in one form or another by all students (Crosling, Thomas and Heagney, 2008). Tinto (2000) also points out that the classroom is often the only setting in which students meet other students and their teachers and expands on some conditions that underpin students’ engagement and thus their persistence in their studies. These include the institution and teachers holding high expectations of students in their learning. They also recognise that many commencing students may not be adequately prepared for the rigours of academic study and so there is the simultaneous need for academic support, in disciplinary contexts, that help students to ‘know the rules (Tinto, 2000, p. 91). Hence, feedback about academic performance is important for a student’s academic success, and involvement with fellow students in learning in the classroom is also an important element of student success (Tinto, 2000).

Student discontinuing even in professional courses like management programmes has been an observed problem at many South African Universities. Reducing the number of students that discontinue their studies is the motivation behind undertaking this study. Hence, this chapter intends to review the core constructs of student retention, the key elements of student retention, and current approaches adopted for retaining students with a focus on master level management programmes at a Namibian University. In doing so the study also addresses the socio-cultural aspects of student retention and intends to provide a holistic framework for enhancing the rate of student retention.

This study was conducted for a master’s programme in management at one campus. Therefore, results may not be generalizable to the broader university populations. Some would consider this a limitation. However, retention is a programme and campus based phenomenon, and different types of campuses tend to attract different types of students (Berger & Lyon, 2005). According to Astin (1990), retention rates vary by campus and due to the differences in the types of students attracted and recruited by certain schools, and it is imperative that institutions provide an environment and climate that fits well with their particular student populations. Therefore, it is not only the responsibility of institutions, but also individual programme heads to help students persist. Furthermore, “each institution must tailor retention to fit the specific needs of its students and the context of that particular institutional environment” (Berger & Lyon, 2005, p. 3). A second limitation is that students who do not return to complete their thesis in the registered semester were considered a dropout although they may have merely ‘stopped out’ for a while and they may return at a future date to conclude their studies.

FOCUS AND BACKGROUND

The focus of this study is retention of students for master level programmes in the management discipline at a Namibian University. Namibia has basically two universities where master level programmes in management are offered. There are one or two private players but as they are more into training and distance learning programmes, this study is restricted to the university offerings only. Retention is an oft-studied topic, particularly more so in recent years due to its linkage to increased tuition revenue and student loans. However, retention studies have focused specifically on undergraduate students until now. Though some studies have been undertaken recently on non-traditional/adult learners, but the overall emphasis has been on undergraduate retention. A study of the literature shows a paucity of retention studies applicable