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# **Student success in open, distance and e-learning**



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## 1. Introduction

- 1.1 In October 2013 the meeting of ICDE Standing Committee of Presidents (SCOP) in Lisbon asked for a Task Group to examine the ways in which student success can be best supported in open, distance and e-learning programmes, and student drop-out and failure diminished.
- 1.2 A Task Group was established in early 2014 with the following terms of reference and membership:

### Mandate

To establish for ICDE members a framework of understanding for establishing goals for student success, and means to monitor and improve it.

### Terms of reference

1. To propose for agreement data points to support definitions of student success at institutional level, e.g. at registration, module start, module completion, and qualifications completion
2. To identify current best practice in strategies for improving student success
3. To make recommendations for improving rates of student success
4. To create a dissemination strategy for outcomes

### Membership

Athbah Al-Kamda, Hamdan bin Mohammed Smart University, United Arab Emirates  
Iolanda Garcia, Universitat Oberta de Catalunya, Spain  
Ojat Darajat, Universitas Terbuka, Indonesia  
Caroline Seelig, Open Polytechnic of New Zealand  
Alan Tait, Open University, UK (Chair)

Research Officer: Hannah Gore, The Open University UK

- 1.3 The group has met on 6 occasions by online conference, and thanks are in particular due to the Universitat Oberta de Catalunya for hosting and managing these meetings. We would also like to acknowledge the support of the wider Reference Group established by ICDE institutions present at the SCOP meeting where the Task Group was established
- 1.4 The group conducted a survey amongst ICDE members, in order to
  - propose for agreement data points to support definitions of student success at an institutional level, e.g. at registration, module start, module completion, and qualification completion
  - to identify current best practice in strategies for improving student success
  - to make recommendations for improving rates of student success
  - to create a dissemination strategy for outcomes

- 1.5 The survey was circulated in draft form to the Reference Group and completed by respondents on behalf of 53 institutions, and the results inform this report as a whole. The survey report is included as an appendix and is available at <http://icde.org/studentsuccessappendix>
- 1.6 The survey responses revealed a number of significant issues that support the report that follows. In summary here in particular the complexities of understanding what makes up student success were discussed at length by the group, including the importance of qualification completion over and above module completion, followed closely by employment outcomes. These were the main focus of institutional strategies for improvement of student success. There was a widespread linking of institutional funding streams with student success, especially where government funding was made available. Endorsement was given in terms of strategies for improving student success to personal contact through a range of methods and media. It is of interest that the enhanced use of data analysis to support intervention strategies was widely endorsed as significant, especially through Learner Analytics, but this was not yet evidenced through institutional practice. Finally, there was a general commitment to research into student success strategies but an absence of evidence that this was then fed back into institutional student support strategies.

## 2. What is the issue?

- 2.1 There are a number of issues that appear to be world-wide in their relevance. Students on Open, distance and e-learning (ODEL) programmes are more likely to be
- adults or post-experience, in the sense that they have not come to study directly from school
  - be studying in the post-secondary sector
  - be part-time students with family or work responsibilities, or both
  - gained access to programmes of study that are more open than those of the elite universities

In addition, students on ODEL programmes may to a greater or lesser extent depending on the educational culture and history of their country come from families with less or no history of post-secondary education, and to come from lower socio-economic demographic cohorts than those in traditional universities or programmes.

- 2.2 While it is impossible to generalize in any absolute way on an international basis about this set of characteristics of students on ODEL programmes, and to collect data to evidence these observations, these descriptors of the social and educational background of ODEL students gain wide acceptability. The distinctions drawn here between ODEL and campus based students are less clear at postgraduate level as opposed to Certificate, Diploma and Bachelors levels.
- 2.3 At the same time, student success rates are widely reported to be lower for part-time than full-time students, and lower for ODEL than for part-time students as a whole. There is an imperative

to improve student success rates firstly for the sake of students who invest their self-esteem, time and money in ODEL programmes, and also for the reputation of ODEL's contribution to educational systems and of the institutions who teach significantly or entirely using ODEL methods (Grau-Valldosera and Minguillon 2014; Hart 2012).

- 2.4 This is the context in which Presidents of both single-mode and dual-mode institutions asked for an investigation of current practice that supported student success and for recommendations that might be shared in the ICDE community as well as more widely.

### **3. Understanding the issues**

- 3.1 The first issue to be addressed is to ask what is specific to ODEL programmes in relation to student success. It is certainly widely though not universally the case that student success in part-time modes of study is less than that of full-time students, and within the part-time cohorts students on ODEL programmes generally do less well in terms of qualification completion than part-time campus based students. Exceptions to these generalisations have been recorded, for example in a case where students in an online programme have completed at higher levels than the parallel campus-based programme, due it is argued to very effective learning design (Creelman and Reneland-Forsman 2013). However, overall for the ODEL sector there is an issue to be addressed of lower rates of student success in ODEL programmes, both objectively where data can be established, and in terms of perception, reputation and institutional brand. This report aims to establish the explanations that are available and to propose what should be regarded as a platform of good practice.
- 3.2 If we accept in the first place that rates of student success are an issue for ODEL programmes, care is needed in proposing explanations of cause and effect. There are two main poles of explanation: the strengths and weaknesses of the students who study in these programmes, and strengths and weaknesses of ODEL modes of study themselves.
- 3.3 The challenges for successful study part-time students, who form the great majority of students on ODEL Programmes, are well known. They derive from the characteristics of educational and social background set out above in paragraph 2.1. These students are admitted to study, especially at undergraduate level, because their path to post-secondary education has not been smooth or easy. Their successful completion of study is widely at a lower level than those from elite and most competitive universities who select carefully from the school leavers most likely to succeed. Institutions who seek to admit and serve these ODEL students take a deliberate and purposeful risk in doing so, in accord with their mission and values (Tait 2013).
- 3.4 However institutional mission driven by the values of access and inclusion can be threatened from a number of perspectives, which have to be carefully managed.
- 3.5 Firstly, institutional missions that are focused on access and inclusion are in conflict with the mission of those institutions who developed narratives of excellence based on selection and exclusion, and who widely dominate accounts of excellence and hierarchy in education. There will always be voices who ask if 'these sorts of people' - i.e. the wider and newer population

cohorts served by ODEL programmes - are worthy of educational opportunity, and these voices are often influential in shaping wider social attitudes to institutions that choose to deliver ODEL programmes.

- 3.6 Secondly, students who come forward to study without the social and cultural capital of the elite are also taking a significant risk in terms of self-esteem, money paid in fees, and time committed to study at the expense of family and leisure.
- 3.7 This mission of access and inclusion must mean that the institutions offering ODEL programmes need, in partnership with students, to manage that risk in transparent and responsible ways. The opportunity for success will however always have in these contexts a higher risk of failure than those institutions who teach the children of families who have often already enjoyed post-secondary education, who study full-time straight after school, and who regulate admission in conventional and selective ways. As reported in the USA context 'graduation rates were highest at post-secondary degree-granting institutions that were the most selective (i.e. had the lowest admissions acceptance rates), and graduation rates were lowest at institutions that were the least selective (i.e. had open admissions policies)' (National Center For Education Statistics 2015). The mission of inclusion and access which for the most part is that of ODEL programmes lies therefore in seeking to achieve something different from the elite universities, and can be proud of that.
- 3.8 This ambition is sometimes explicitly reflected in mission statements, or is informally part of the goal of being more flexible and accessible. It needs however to be understood by those planning ODEL programmes, and senior leadership in institutions which decide to diversify their mission into online or blended programmes, that they will be more likely to admit students with lower entry qualifications and with the challenges of managing part-time study with working life and family responsibilities, which will impact negatively on programme completion outcomes as compared with traditional full-time student in highly selective colleges or universities.
- 3.9 This takes nothing away from the value and importance of a mission that attempts to widen opportunity and contribute to social justice. But it brings a particular set of responsibilities that must focus on supporting opportunity and success at the same time as widening access. There is clearly a tension between wanting to maximise registration numbers and being responsible in advising intending students about their preparedness for study. While the responsibility may in the end lie with the student to take the decision, it must be in a context of ethical recruitment practice that is closer to advising a client than selling a product.
- 3.10 There is sadly and shamefully a history in ODEL of commercial motives conflicting with that sense of responsibility, and too many recent instances of institutions, in particular private for-profit colleges, where admissions practice has not been ethically and transparently managed, to the severe detriment of the students who pay high fees, and accumulate debt without the benefit of qualification. These debts have in the recent episode in the USA been supported by government and taxpayer who make loans which are at severe risk of non-repayment and default (Economist 2013).

3.11 This is the background for student success in ODEL. The remainder of this report is concerned with the range of practices that best support student success in this context (for an overall introduction see Brindley, Walti and Zawacki-Richter 2004).

## 4. The framework of practice to support student success

4.1 A framework to support student success is an organic whole-institution system, that is to say it must be based on the student's whole experience of study. It is sometimes in accounts of practice limited to a heading of student support, but important though this element is, this is an inadequate approach to supporting the overall student experience.

4.2 In summary there are a number of key elements that support practice for student success

- pre-study information, advice, guidance and admission
- curriculum or programme design for student success
- intervention at key points and in response to student need
- assessment to support learning as well as to judge achievement
- individualised and personalised systems of support to students
- information and logistical systems that communicate between all relevant participants in the system
- managing for student success

4.3 The deployment of these elements in ODEL programmes and educational systems will of necessity reflect the specific programme needs, institutional capacities, technology affordances and cultures and histories of the country or region. However, more detail can be given to each of the elements in terms of good practice.

## 5. Pre-study information, advice, guidance and admission

5.1 This stage in the cycle of activities in a student's engagement with the institution is crucial. As noted above it is here that the tension between student acquisition and business growth, the ambitions of both student and institution in terms of opportunity, and the ethics of supporting clients rather than achieving sales targets are felt at their most acute.

5.2 Marketing: sales and marketing activities are essential if the institution is to make its offer known to relevant sectors of the public. However, misleading statements, for example, about how easy it is to study will lead some students to register on an unrealistic basis and to individual disappointment and high dropout statistics.

5.3 Information: information on all dimensions of study must be clear to the enquirer, including recommended educational levels needed for the programme, time needed for study, number of years needed to complete the programme, the curriculum character of the programme including

learning and work-related outcomes, the systems for student support, assessment schedules, and fee levels and the nature of the customer commitment.

- 5.4 Advice and guidance: there need to be channels of communication open to enquirers so that he or she can engage on an individual basis with questions about study. The advice and guidance staff should have their professional goals derived from enquirer satisfaction, not sales targets.
- 5.5 It is here that the channels of communication in terms of technology will need to be selected according to the needs and capabilities of the enquirer cohort. These may include face to face, letter, telephone and email, or a combination of these, and may include newer practices of web-based access to peer support through wikis, and to study materials (Ali and Fadziel 2012; UT 2010).
- 5.6 There should be quality assurance for this, as for all other elements that support student success, to include systems to provide feedback on accuracy, helpfulness and timeliness of enquirer interactions.
- 5.7 Admissions: the interaction with the enquirer may lead to admission, and if so should be managed on a transparent basis in terms of commitments to patterns of study, cost and commitment. Interaction with the enquirer may also lead to a decision by the enquirer or the institution not to proceed with registration, and this should be regarded as a legitimate outcome.

## **6. Curriculum or programme for student success**

- 6.1 Innovation in ODEL systems has focused much on learning design for student success, significantly because teaching in new ways demanded attention to the process of learning that might be assumed in the past in campus based systems. These have included the pioneering of learning outcomes, continuous assessment derived from those learning outcomes, the use of diagrams and other visual supports in learning materials, and the use of radio and television for both core and supplementary teaching. While the social dimension of learning has until the recent possibilities delivered by the digital revolution been less in ODEL than in campus-based systems, it has often been the case that the resources for learning have been richer in ODEL systems.
- 6.2 It is only possible in a short report to emphasise the significant contribution of effective learning design to student success. While theoretical accounts have moved over the recent period from a widespread absence of attention in higher education to accounts of learning, then in ODEL has moved through behaviourism to constructivism, and more recently connectionism, the core point of importance is that explicit design for learning is actively practised.
- 6.3 Effective Learning design will deliver, amongst other things, student engagement, that is to say will support a positive engagement between the learner and his or her programme of study. The resilience of that engagement is core to delivering student success and mitigating drop-out.

- 6.4 Curriculum relevance is also key. It is essential that the module or programme is accurately described in the documents that form the basis of the student decision to pursue that area of study.
- 6.5 The nature of programmes of study derive from a range of determinants or influences that have to be managed. These are driven in ODEL contexts above all by what students want to study, in other words by the market. But that market can be substantially influenced by what institutions tell students is valuable, especially from the employment and livelihood perspectives. This needs to be honest and not unrealistic in terms of possibilities. It may demand knowledge of labour market trends, insofar as they can be understood.
- 6.6 Other drivers of curriculum design will include regulation from government as well as in some cases from professional bodies; academic understanding of disciplines and academic currency; and the major issues that are important in society e.g. sustainability; HIV-AIDS; and ethics. These may well not all be in alignment and considerable skill is needed to resolve tensions between them in a compelling curriculum offer.

## **7. Intervention at key points and in response to student need**

- 7.1 The stages of the student experience provide the structure in which learner support and in particular intervention to support individual students. These are commonly represented as:
- pre-study: post registration, and review of readiness to start
  - in-course: early contact; first assignment; mid module; qualification progress check; preparing for examination
  - through qualification: support for next module choice and qualification planning.
- 7.2 Intervention should be both universal, taking the points in the schedule above as times when all students may need support; and individual when prompts reveal that a student is having difficulty or not making progress, for example failing to submit an assignment. Intervention has been practised in many ODEL systems for many years, and has been demonstrated to improve student completion. The capacity to utilise digitally-held data in real time - the practise of learning analytics - now makes intervention potentially much more immediate and powerful. It is clear from the ICDE member survey that learning analytics is widely seen as having significant potential to support student success, but remains at this stage relatively unfulfilled as a practice. There are also ethical and legal issues about data protection which have yet to be fully resolved, in particular in some jurisdictions (Slade and Prinsloo 2013).
- 7.3 It is also clear from the ICDE survey of members that information that is collected is not optimally used to improve the student experience. There need to be focused cycles of review of module design in response to feedback.

## **8. Assessment**

- 8.1 Assessment plays a crucial part in supporting students to success. It is integral to learning design and pedagogy, not as an add-on at a subsequent stage. Assessment strategies are derived from the learning objectives of the module, and include both knowledge and skills. ODEL programmes have for many years used both formative and summative assessment, and both continuous and final assessment. This range of assessment practices acknowledges the needs of adult learners. Online learning systems now have the capacity to provide frequent shorter assessment tasks which support student engagement and diagnose learning at shorter intervals, thus supporting student success.

## **9. Personalised support**

- 9.1 At the heart capacity of the teaching system which operates at a physical distance from its students to support them to success lies its capacity to provide personalised support: in other words to recognise and respond to the learner as an individual. It is here in particular that the roles of tutor, counsellor, guidance worker, and careers advisor have developed, supported by information systems (Sungkatavat and Boonyarataphan 2012).
- 9.2 The advent of the web has made possible the potential of much easier student-tutor and student-student communication, through email and electronic conferences. In some ODEL systems student support is enhanced through social clubs and networks. The development of student peer support through Facebook, wikis and other similar crowd approaches offers much for student support.
- 9.3 While the creation of learning resources is for the most part uniform for all learners, and benefits from the cost-effectiveness of scale, individualised support to students has the opposite cost dynamic, i.e. it increases with the number of students. There will therefore need to be serious consideration given to how much of an overall teaching budget is given to the production of learning resources, and how much to individualised student support. Too often in the institutional histories of ODEL the resources have been allocated to production of learning materials, with individualised support coming into the budget as an afterthought. A holistic and transparent approach that recognises the importance of both elements is more likely to lead to the most effective outcomes in terms of student success.

## **10. Information and logistical systems**

- 10.1 The combination of logistics and information systems has in one form or another been crucial to ODEL programmes from correspondence models through, even more intensely, to today's online. The contribution to student success of effective and timely management of learning embedded in learning and teaching materials, assessment, and learner support services is

central. Learning Management Systems (LMS) have provided an integrating framework for many years now, from both commercial and open source models, e.g. Moodle.

- 10.2 The fast developing area of learner analytics, where the practice of customer care from commercial settings using digitally held data to support intervention is reinvented for educational purposes is of considerable significance. Issues of privacy and confidentiality create ethical and legal challenges which will be managed differently in a variety of legal settings. It is clear from the ICDE Survey that member institutions regard learner analytics as central to future development, but that promise is at this stage greater than achievement. Learner analytics represent a significant priority in strategies for student success.

## **11. Managing for Student Success**

- 11.1 All of the above mean that Student Success is at one and the same time crucial to the purposes of ODEL programmes and institutions and challenging to achieve, at least as compared with highly selective post-secondary systems. Attention to this proposition underpins the ways in which 'putting the learner at the heart of the system' can be made a reality. It is clear from the ICDE survey that this is well understood by member institutions

- 11.2 Good practice for ODEL programmes would include

- a strategy for student success and the mitigation of drop-out at module, qualification and institutional levels, with a distinctive focus on the first or the early modules of study
- the strategy should be a whole-institution issue and cross-functional, that is to say ensuring that curriculum producers, student support, student admissions and learning advisors, tutor and instructor cohorts and management address the issue jointly
- the strategy should propose steady and realistic improvement, and investigate any backward steps in rates of student success in a timely way
- data on student success needs to be distributed and acted on in order to underpin intervention at both general student population and individual student levels, and with learning materials and assessment strategies
- admissions policy and practice should take account of rates of student success in transparent and honest ways with future students
- accountability within the institution for management of student success should be clear at course, qualification and institutional levels

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