Student Dropout: 
The Elephant in the Room

Alan Woodley and
Ormond Simpson

This chapter is a little different from other chapters in this book. It is in the form of a dialogue between two educational researchers, both partly retired, who have between them spent more than 70 years in distance education. The chapter is not an academic treatise—it does not contain an argument supported by references. It is unashamedly polemical and reflects the authors’ contention that there is an issue often (and indeed even scandalously) neglected in the hype about distance education: student dropout.

Ormond Simpson:

Dear Alan,

When I joined the United Kingdom Open University (UKOU) in 1974 one of the first things I read was an excellent article by you about retention. Naïvely I thought that everyone shared your own view as to the importance of student retention in distance learning. It seemed so obvious that
what happened to its students would be the ultimate test of an institution. But since then I’ve watched as retention became or remained the ultimate invisible elephant in the room, the statistic to which everyone gives lip service but apparently no serious thought.

Now the UKOU’s graduation rate (the simplest measure of student retention) is 22%—only one in five of its new students ever end up with a degree from the UKOU. That compares with a graduation rate of 82% for full-time students and 39% for part-time students at UK universities (HEFCE, 2009. Note these rates are calculated over 11 years after entry in 1997).

And the UKOU is better than most. Where the data are available (and not surprisingly they’re hard to find) the graduation rates in international distance education are often around 10% or less (Simpson, 2011a)—see figure 17.1. (Note that the London University International Program is in effect a mix of distance and face-to-face.)

**Figure 17.1** Graduation rates at distance education and conventional institutions.

Now, these figures are disputable. They are derived from a variety of sources (see the reference), some may be unreliable, and they take no account of the way distance students can transfer to other institutions, decide that they only want an intermediate qualification and so on. Some institutions including those above may well have high transfer-out rates. On
the other hand, we know that much dropout occurs very heavily in the first few weeks of a first module (up to 40% in the case of the UKOU), and the data suggests that such students do not return, so it seems unlikely that they later transfer elsewhere. There is also unsubstantiated evidence that other distance institutions also have low graduation rates (the University of Phoenix at 5%, the University of South Africa at 6%, and so on).

Clearly we need far more research into what happens to distance students. But for the moment it seems safe to assume that average graduation rates in distance education are lower than those in conventional education by a considerable fraction.

In addition where we have good historical data there are signs that graduation rates may be actually decreasing. The UKOU graduation rate has declined from around 59% in its first year to its current level of 22% (Simpson, 2011b)—see figure 17.2.

**Figure 17.2** Cumulative UKOU graduation rates (%) by year of enrolment.

Since it can take up to 11 years for graduation figures to become more or less constant, it is difficult to establish the latest graduation data for any institution. However, in the case of the UKOU the number of graduates each year still appears to be decreasing (see figure 17.3) despite increasing enrolments.
We cannot extrapolate from UKOU figures to other institutions. But if this is the case for an institution widely held to be an international cynosure of distance education, then other institutions’ dropout rates may well follow similar trends. Why is this and do you think it can ever be changed?

**ALAN WOODLEY:**

Retention is indeed the elephant in the room that is distance education. You ask why is this and can it be changed?

In answer to your first question, I would suggest that few people care as long as the lights are off and the elephant behaves itself.

The paper that you mentioned had been written because somebody at the Open University had noticed that drop-out rates on higher level modules had been increasing year on year (Editor’s note: in UKOU parlance a module is a short—often one year—course of study that combines with other modules—up to ten or so—to form a degree course or program). On the basis of our research, Malcolm Parlett and I (Woodley & Parlett, 1983) advanced various reasons for this, but before we could publish, the trend was reversed (almost certainly due to the increase in fees, which seem to inspire increased effort and higher completion). Interest in the topic immediately diminished.

Can it be changed? Of course! In my book only death precludes intervention. All we need is an appreciation of the complexity of the phenomenon, recognition of cost-effective strategies, and the motivation to act.
To extend your metaphor, can/should we poke the elephant with a pointed stick?

ORMOND:
Thanks, Alan. Poking the education distance elephant with a sharp stick is not likely to be a career-enhancing move—as perhaps our careers illustrate.

But I take the point about the motivation to act. It seems to me that distance institutions have very little motivation to act on retention. They resemble the old correspondence colleges who made their money off the students who enrolled and then promptly dropped out, thus requiring no more costly services. As there was never a shortage of new students, this policy worked well—I think you pointed this out in your recent vividly entitled article “Plenty of Saps.”

Part of the problem is that distance institutions don’t seem to be required to publish their retention data. If they did, potential students might be charier of investing their money. After all, if you were going to buy a bus ticket and the driver said, “Morning sir, you do realize that there’s only a 20% chance that this bus will reach its destination?” Would you get on board?

Instead, in the UK institutions rely on quoting from the National Student Survey in their publicity material. The UKOU always gets glowing reports from that survey. But of course the survey only goes to roughly 30% of students—those who are well on the way to graduation. Any bus company would get a good report if they were careful to only ask the passengers who arrived on time, despite the fact that such people were probably only a fraction of their passengers overall.

So what stick would you suggest for poking and what part of the elephant?

ALAN:
I think there might be a bit of a stick shortage! In an ideal world, of course, protest would arise among the consumers/students who have been failed by the system. Singly or collectively they would make their displeasure known to the institution and improvements would be made. This seems unlikely to happen for a number of reasons.

In my experience, students who withdraw ignore Dylan Thomas’s plea and do “go gentle into that good night.” They just fade away back into their
safe havens. When provoked by surveys they blame themselves or their life circumstances. The University itself is usually singled out for praise, apart possibly from workload problems. It seems unlikely that they will even tell their friends not to partake.

There is a students’ union that is massively subsidized by the University, has representatives on all committees, and all students belong to it. Why is the improvement of student retention not its key policy aim every year? Is it because the union representatives are usually battle-hardened successful students? Or have they too been beguiled by the University’s public relations campaigns with its picturesque graduation ceremonies and case studies of former chip shop workers who are now professional design engineers?

ORMOND:

Alan, sadly I suspect you’re right about the self-blame capacity of students who drop out. And, of course, the successful students can point to the high dropout rates and say, “Look, see how tough it is, and yet I succeeded.”

But I suspect it’s not just the students who are affected by that feeling but distance education staff as well. I think staff can have two approaches to students:

(1) “We’re here to weed out the unfit—we’re here to set the standards and if some students don’t reach them then that’s all to the good.” I think of this as the Darwinista approach.

(2) “Students are doomed to pass or fail and there’s not much we can do about it—we’ll provide the highest quality learning experiences we can but it’s up to the students to use them.” I call this the Fatalista approach.

I’m not saying either attitude is completely wrong, but that they can be and often are carried too far. Yes, we have to set standards but that’s not the same as weeding people out. And Fatalistas have to remember that the highest quality learning experience you can give students is to pass their course. Just talking about high-quality learning experiences may be to let ourselves off the hook.

I was at a conference recently where most of the speakers were talking about their new podcasts, video clips, podcasts, computer forum techniques, and so on. I tried to remind colleagues of Anderson’s comment that
most students drop out because of reduced motivation, and that the first thing students do when they are losing motivation is to stop visiting websites, watching podcasts, and so on. Concentrating on providing elegant teaching materials is like focussing on how to ice a cake, forgetting that you have to bake it first. Or, more pejoratively perhaps, visiting a battlefield site and offering the survivors manicures—half your combatant learners have already gone. And, by and large, lost learners do not speak—yet.

The hope is that students will be engaged and motivated by technology and stay on course as a result. But the evidence for that happening is still rather thin and it’s relatively rare to find research that tries to find such evidence. For example, a recent study that I recently approved in refereeing tried to measure the retention effect of social networking in computer forums in a course and found no increase (Anon, 2012). And anyone who has spent any time on a computer will know that technology can have a deterrent effect as well.

So if we can’t rely on students or staff to put pressure on about retention, is there anyone else? There is increasing competition in distance education from providers worldwide—the biggest growth in distance education at the moment is apparently from for-profit providers such as the University of Phoenix and many Asian for-profit universities, as well as corporate training arms such as the “Coca-Cola University,” with sovereign providers such as China not far behind. Will any of them try to compete on the basis of increased retention for their students?

ALAN:

That might happen but I’m doubtful. For example I think that UKOU academics are not all that bothered about drop-out rates on the modules they produce because there are no real penalties attached and because they are too distant from the “coal-face” to see the human impact. By the time the modules are running, the academics are writing new courses and it is the tutors who have to pick up the pieces. I fear that this distance between students and course creators, a feature of many industrial model forms of distance education, may be an unfortunate bi-product of this model.

The majority of OU students don’t graduate. Dropping out is the norm and the graduate is the “deviant.” So researchers should be thinking of dropping out as normal behaviour. They should not be looking for personality flaws in the “failures.”
As you know very well, we can predict a person’s chance of OU study success with a fair degree of accuracy. So, should we tell a black 23-year-old with no educational qualifications that his chances of passing are virtually zero?

ORMOND:

Thanks, Alan. We should just explain the UKOU’s predicted probability of success system briefly for people who’ve not come across it. Using a statistical binary regression analysis of previous students’ success linked with their entry characteristics, such as previous education, gender, age and so on; we can attach a predicted probability of success to every new student entering the University. Figure 17.4 shows the number of students in each probability of success band for the approximately 50,000 students entering a few years ago and shows, for example, that around 3,000 students had between a 20 to 30% chance of completing their module that year (Simpson, 2006).

This prediction is surprisingly accurate (Simpson, 2006)—see figure 17.5. This predictive model is a simple example of the newish field of learning analytics—the collection of data about learners, partly in order to identify the conditions that might cause them to disengage before they actually do (Siemens, 2011). It’s possible that such systems may enable tutors to intervene and reduce dropout, but given the fact that much dropout is before learners have fully engaged in the first place and that the level of intervention may need to be at a level that is unlikely to be fundable, I’m doubtful that it will make a difference. As Schum (2011) asks, (playing devil’s advocate) “surely data analytics have nothing to say about intrinsic disposition to learn, emotional resilience in the face of adversity. . . .” We must see.

So returning to your question Alan—this is such a tricky ethical issue you’ve sneaked in! If we don’t tell him, then we might be guilty at the least of letting him waste his time and money and simply adding to what might be a sense of on-going failure. On the other hand if we do tell him, will that demoralize him right from the outset so that prediction becomes self-fulfilling? After all, even if he’s in the 10% probability of success band that still means he might be the one in ten who would have succeeded—if only we hadn’t told him.
There may be a way out of this dilemma if, instead of telling him, we let him find out in such a way that enables him to change that probability. Let him take a self-assessed diagnostic test that tells him privately his chances of success, but also tells him how he could increase those chances—for example, by taking a different module, improving his entry qualifications, and so on. I’d have liked to experiment along those lines in the UKOU but never quite had the courage.

But this may be a straw elephant: a colleague of mine at the University of South Africa ran a small-scale experiment in which he did tell students their chances of success (Pretorius & Prinsloo, 2010). He found that retention actually improved in the group he told. This was too small a scale experiment to draw conclusions from but fascinating just the same. However
we’re getting off the topic a little. Tell me in one paragraph what your personal recipe for retention would be.

**ALAN:**

How would I reduce dropout?

1. Make it harder to get in. Not through selection but with brutal honesty about what the students will be getting into and make them think carefully about it.

2. Make it harder to get out. Don’t let them drift off into the void.

**ORMOND:**

I think you’ve probably summed it up in two phrases! I might try to be a bit less than “brutal” about letting students in—I’d be wary of the danger of deterring potential students who would succeed but who lack the confidence to start. We all have stories of the truck driver with no qualifications that got a first in maths, the housewife who was told by her teachers that she’d never amount to anything who ended up with a master’s in literature, and so on. So I think I might reword your suggestion to say we should be very much clearer about what students should expect in a module—after all the second most common reason UKOU students give for dropping out is that they were on the wrong module.

But again, you’re right about making it harder to get out. Some years ago a UKOU colleague and I tried to work out just how many ways there were of “escaping” from the University. We came up with 14 exit points: failing to register on a module after an offer, dropping out without telling the University, formally withdrawing, failing to pay a fee on time, failing to attend a summer school, failing to accept a re-sit exam offer—the list went on and on. We tried to set up a response from the University to each point—we felt like the apocryphal little Dutch boy—with 14 fingers in the dike. We did have some very modest success with formal withdrawals where we did manage to retrieve around 4% of them—usually they had withdrawn because they’d misunderstood some aspect of the regulations or the University’s quite unnecessarily complex assessment system.
ALAN:

Reasons for dropping out are many and various. So a single theory that attempts to explain all dropouts will be so general as to be vacuous. It will be like saying that death is caused by people stopping breathing!

ORMOND:

Well yes, we know that the reason students give for dropping out are often rationalizations, and that taking them seriously is often a great way of letting ourselves off the hook (again) as they are often things we could do nothing about—illness, job changes, and so on. Personally I think there’s one overwhelming reason why students dropout—I go with Professor Edward Anderson’s comment: “The best predictor of student retention is motivation. Retention services need to clarify and build on motivation and address motivation-reducing issues. Most students drop out because of reduced motivation.” (Anderson, 2006)

But “being on the wrong module” occurs sufficiently often as a reason to be worth doing something about. We’ve experimented in the past with several ways of giving students course choice advice (Simpson, 2004). Three in particular I thought could be effective. These were:

- **Diagnostic quizzes.** These are most useful for maths, science, and technology-based modules.

- **Students’ course reviews.** Students who have completed a module would post advice on the web for new students contemplating that module. Such user ratings are becoming very popular on social networks and may carry more weight with new students than the descriptions provided by the institution, which, owing to the increasing desperation of the marketing people to recruit, seem to become more of a hard sell every year. (For examples of student course reviews see http://www3.open.ac.uk/study/undergraduate/course/aa100.htm)

- **Taster packs.** These would provide samples of the module content and assessment material including student assignments with tutors comments and would be designed to give students a kind of test drive of a module. Or perhaps, even bolder, release the whole student
package as an open educational resource, so that students are fully aware of the content, activities, and expectations of the unit.

It’s very difficult to design experiments that assess if such materials actually help students make better course choices. And I remember getting criticized by some OU faculty for using taster packs, as they said seeing course materials would deter some students from registering. In fact we found students said they were actually more motivated to study the module when they could see more exactly what kind of challenge it would be. It’s often fear of the unknown that’s the greatest fear. But going back a bit when you said, “Make it harder to get out. Don’t let them drift off into the void”—what did you have in mind?

ALAN:
If I had to advocate a single strategy to reduce dropout rate, I would phone up the students on a regular basis and ask them how they are doing.

ORMOND:
Again, I think you’ve hit the nail on the head very precisely. I’d include e-mailing students regularly as well, but in the end retention is mostly a function of proactive contact from institution to student. So much of the effort in institutions goes into reactive contact—waiting for students to contact the institution and ask for help. I’m reminded of another of Professor Edward Anderson’s comments: “Student self-referral does not work as a mode of promoting persistence. Students who need services the most refer themselves the least. Effective retention services take the initiative in outreach and timely interventions with those students” (Anderson, 2006).

We even have evidence for your strategy in the UKOU’s PaSS (Proactive Student Support) Project. In this project new students were divided into a control and experimental group so that both groups had identical average predicted probability of success. The experimental group then received a short (about 10 minutes long) pre-module phone call. The results showed a consistent 5% increase in retention at the end of the module (Gibbs, Regan, & Simpson, 2007)—see table 17.1.
Table 17.1 Results of the UKOU PaSS Project.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Number of students in trial</th>
<th>Increase in retention of experimental group over control</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>2,866</td>
<td>3.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>1,354</td>
<td>5.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>931</td>
<td>4.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>10,131</td>
<td>7.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals 2002–2004</td>
<td>5,151</td>
<td>5.04%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Five percent doesn’t sound like very much, but it was rather more than any other project had achieved and it was the result of just one proactive intervention. Also, and very importantly, it was cost-effective—the cost of the intervention per student was less than increase in the government grant for module completion. That’s worth exploring later.

We also used a learning motivational model for the content of the phone call. One of my contentions about distance learning is that it is sometimes too self-centred and doesn’t look outside itself for useful research findings. I believe that there’s interesting work being done by psychologists, such as Dweck, Seligman, Keller, and others, on what motivates students to learn that we can use. Our phone call used a melange of their approaches, which we called proactive motivational support, and I increasingly believe that the role of the teacher in distance education is less to teach and very much more to motivate students to learn (Simpson, 2008a).

There’s other data about the retention effects of proactive contact using e-mail (Rekkedahl, 1982; Case and Elliot, 1997; Chyung, 2001; Visser, 1998), including some recent research by myself (2010), Twyford (2007), and Huett, Kalinowski, Moller, and Huett (2008)—see table 17.2.

It’s possible that such proactive contact could be made by other media such as text messages, tweets, or Facebook notifications. The advantage of using texts in developing countries is the much wider access to mobile phones than the Internet. But Facebook, Twitter, and other schemes may have the same disadvantage as all Internet-based contact systems—the first thing a student does when they are becoming de-motivated is to stop visiting sites and following feeds. I suspect the same may be true for social
networking—students using Facebook and other social networking sites to communicate, although I think you differ from me on this!

Table 17.2 Retention increases using proactive motivational support methods.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study</th>
<th>Method</th>
<th>Finding</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rekkedahl (1982, Norway)</td>
<td>Postcards</td>
<td>46% increase in retention</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Case &amp; Elliot (1997, US)</td>
<td>Phone calls</td>
<td>15-20% increase in retention</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visser (1990, UK)</td>
<td>Postcards</td>
<td>27% increase in retention</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chyung (2001, US)</td>
<td>Phone calls</td>
<td>Dropout reduced from 44% to 22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mager (2003, US)</td>
<td>‘Telecounselling’</td>
<td>5% increase in retention</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simpson (2006, UK)</td>
<td>Phone call before course starts</td>
<td>5.04%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Twyford (2007, Aus)</td>
<td>Motivational emails</td>
<td>11.7% increase over control</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Huett (2008, US)</td>
<td>Motivational emails</td>
<td>23.4% increase over control</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simpson (2001, UK)</td>
<td>Phone calls plus motivational emails</td>
<td>18.9% increase over control</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I wonder if you want to comment here about using other media as well—from text messages as they do in Africa to Tweets and Facebook notifications. We find that students rarely phone anymore and are even less likely to answer the phone.

I think your comment also illustrates another important point about retention: the need to focus very tightly on a very few cost-effective strategies rather than trying to do everything that might have some effect (I think of this as the “retention goulash” approach). As Veronique Johnston of Napier University writes, “Trying everything that works doesn’t work” (Johnston, 2002).

We will both remember the UKOU’s retention project, which we worked on some twelve years ago, that produced—was it?—38 recommendations. When we went back a few years later it was very hard to see if any of them had actually happened. I remember at a conference in Bogota a couple of years ago, Vincent Tinto—the doyen of full-time student retention—saying that in his extensive experience many retention projects had simply faded
out after a few years (Tinto, 2009). It seems to me that without that clear focus on one or two retention strategies that’s bound to happen.

Veronique’s comment reminds me of a similar statement from Professor John Hattie from his famous meta-survey of teaching methods: “Almost everything works” (Hattie, 2008). The difficulty then is finding what works most cost-effectively. Because you don’t have unlimited resources to spend on student retention, and if you spread it too thinly you’re in danger of getting no effects at all. And of course if you’re lucky enough to get a retention increase you have no idea which of your many initiatives had the most effect. So you don’t find out what the cost-benefits of them were.

Talking of costs and benefits, what do you think of the recent changes in the UK on university funding? The UK government is withdrawing substantial amounts of direct university funding and developing a student loan scheme so students will pay much increased tuition fees.

**ALAN:**

The UKOU has probably stumbled on the best way to reduce dropout. As a result of the UK government’s new fee policy, UKOU has announced a massive hike in fees (from around £500 for a 60-credit point module to £2500). Previous findings have shown that people will think twice about withdrawing when they have made a large financial commitment. However, the downside is that registrations will also drop!

**ORMOND:**

This feels like a massive enforced gamble on UKOU’s part. It will be hoping that students will compare its fees of £5000 per year equivalent favourably with the £9000 per year that full-time students have to invest. But thinking back to our earlier discussion, UK full-time students have only a risk of 18% of losing that investment through dropping out, whereas UKOU part-time students face a nearly 80% risk of loss. A financial adviser who recommended that investment would be up before an ethics committee, wouldn’t he? In fact investing in distance education is riskier than investing in wildcat oil well drilling, where there’s generally only a 10% risk of losing your money!
ALAN:
Well maybe we should approach dropout from a different perspective. It’s true that the majority of OU students don’t graduate. So dropping out is the norm and the graduate is the “deviant.” So researchers should be thinking of dropping out as normal behaviour. They should not be looking for personality flaws in the “failures.”

ORMOND:
I like your concept of dropping out as normal behaviour! But that raises another issue that worries me about distance education’s sanguine approach to student retention. Given that the main output of distance institutions is dropped-out students (up to 90% in some cases) what is the effect on those people of dropping out? There’s some evidence from John Bynner of the University of London Institute of Education that dropping out of full-time higher education is bad for you (Bynner & Edgerton, 2001). As you can see, figure 17.6 shows the relative probability of experiencing depression, unemployment, and (for women) violence from partners, according to educational experience.

Students that drop out of full-time higher education appear to have a higher probability of negative effects than either successful completers (which might be expected) but also than people who never went to university in the first place. Now it could be argued that people drop out (for example) because they become depressed, rather than become depressed because they’ve dropped out. This is arguable, although it seems inherently more likely that people become depressed as a result of an action (dropping out) rather than spontaneously becoming depressed and then dropping out. And after all they were not too depressed to get into university in the first place. Professor Sir John Layard suggests that depression is the biggest health issue in the UK and costs the nation many millions of pounds in lost production and treatment. So if this data is in any way an accurate representation of the reality, then the subsequent cost to UK society of treating dropout-related depression and paying for unemployment must be in the billions of pounds.
But does this apply in any way to distance education? Given that distance students are often studying part-time, are working or running a home, and are consequently less involved in their studies, can we hope that dropping out of distance education has much less serious effects than dropping out of full-time education. But do we know that? Has anyone researched this? Since dropout students are our main output, we really ought to know what effect we are having on them. At the least there should be a distance education version of the Hippocratic oath (which doctors still swear in some form) that we should do no harm.

My suspicion is that many distance education students are already partial casualties of our education systems and are studying to try to overcome the consequences of their previous education. So dropping out may actually add to their negative learning experiences and view of themselves. Of course as distance educators we are probably fortunate that dropout students tend to blame themselves rather than us. But if—as you suggest—students begin to pay considerably more for their courses will that attitude change? Might they demand a more secure investment return for their course fees? Let’s hope so!
Now, so far you and I have talked almost exclusively about the role of student support as a way of reducing dropout. Your suggestion that supporting students by phoning them up is the best way to increase their retention I’m sure is absolutely right. I heard this put in its most succinct form when I was at an academic board meeting of the Open Polytechnic of New Zealand where there were some student representatives. One of them was asked what was the most important single thing that kept her going on her course. She immediately replied (imagine this in a Kiwi accent), “Well, if a tutor phones me, I love them already.”

But there is another aspect to reducing dropout and that’s the distance course itself. The way a distance education course is structured, its workload, its assessment strategies and its style of writing, must all affect its retention rate. I know you did some work on comparing courses for retention very early in the life of the UKOU—what were your conclusions then, and are they still relevant today?

ALAN:

In 1981 the highest dropout rate for a UKOU module was 71 percent and the lowest 17 percent, a range of 54 percent! (Woodley & Parlett, 1983). This variation was almost certainly related to the aspects of course design you mention. But these aspects are hard to quantify and all we were able to do was to look at certain more concrete course features. For example, we showed that dropout was higher on maths modules, on 30- (rather than 60-) credit point modules, on modules with no residential summer school, on modules with few students, and on modules that had been running for a number of years.

However, our conclusions were extremely cautious. It was not simply a case of recommending that new courses should avoid the negative features we had identified. It was debatable whether the relationships we had found were simply causal ones, what would be the knock-on effects of such changes, whether the relationship was strong enough to warrant action, and whether the UKOU could actually make these changes.

When faced with a module with a high dropout rate, academics usually have a story about why it was a disaster. They are less good at identifying and implementing good design principles, and I would have to say that research has not helped them much. The pre-testing of new courses has been of
limited value, and replacement versions of old courses tend to be different rather than demonstrably better.

ORMOND:

I believe that the variation in dropout rates between courses is still going on in the UKOU at least. Just a few years ago another UKOU colleague and I created a scattergram for modules where we plotted the percentage of students actually getting to the module final exam against the percentage passing the exam—see figure 17.7.

**Figure 17.7** Variations in course module dropout rates as related to attending and passing exams.

Each point represents a module and as you can see there are huge variations in both getting to the exam and passing the exam rates. The dotted crosshairs are at the average rates and divide the scattergram into four quadrants. The modules that concerned me most were the ones in the lower right quadrant—modules where a large number of students got to the exam but then failed it. This seemed to me to be breaking a contract we have with
students: if they put in the work and pass the continuous assessment part of the module, they should have a good chance of passing the exam.

You can also see that following on from the variations in getting and passing rates, there are even larger variations in overall completion rates since they are the product of getting and passing rates. The highest course module at the top right-hand of the chart (T302) has an overall completion rate of more than 80% compared with the lowest at the bottom left (T331) which is in the region of 40%, despite, in this case, both modules being at the same level in the same faculty.

My colleague, a man of more courage than I, approached the course module team saying, “We notice that the success rates on your module are rather low compared with others in the same faculty. Can we help in some way?” To which the inevitable reply was, “No thanks. We know the rates are low, it’s a difficult module.” A truly Darwinista response.

But let me move on to a different topic. What about e-learning? Most of the articles I see in journals these days are about some aspect of e-learning, often about some novel way of presenting material. But I don’t seem to see anything much that relates to increasing student retention. E-learning seems to me to be the classic case of the Fatalista approach to teaching: We’ll put all our effort into doing lovely podcasts rather than doing what would actually increase retention—contacting students.

**ALAN:**

I am a bit more optimistic than you, Ormond. For one thing I was always a fan of student self-help groups and the ability of students in them to support and motivate each other. E-learning and especially the recent developments in social networking, such as the use of Facebook, means that these groups can be formed electronically and can operate across any distance. Also, e-learning can provide a great variety of study activities and break up the monotony of endless reading. However, just as with TV broadcasts in the early days, if these activities are not made integral to the course and assessable, then time-pressed students will omit them.

It is early days, but when I looked at the retention rates on UKOU courses that use e-learning they are very similar to those that do not. In fact, a good hypothesis in distance education seems to be that whatever you do, retention rates seem to stay much the same!
ORMOND:
That’s a depressing thought! But in the absence of dedicated research efforts to change distance education retention rates I wonder if that’s really true. I’m a Marxist in that context. As he said: “Philosophers have interpreted the world; the point, however, is to change it”. Following that train of thought I suspect in the end it comes down to finance. I’ve been trying to follow the advice of Deep Throat in the Watergate saga, “Follow the Money.” It seems to me that there is a fundamental misapprehension that retention is a pure cost to institutions. But in fact it’s not difficult to show that spending money on retention can actually make an institutional profit if it’s done properly (Simpson, 2008b). Maybe a wider acknowledgement of that fact would be the ultimate key to persuading distance educators that retention is not just important but the single most important concept in distance education?

ALAN:
I certainly think that it would be instructive to highlight just how much it costs to recruit each new OU student. Like you, I suspect that it is far more than the cost of retaining a current student. Apart from anything else, it seems that UKOU’s strategy of throwing more and more marketing resources at the task of recruiting vast numbers of new students is unsustainable in the long run.

ORMOND:
Lastly, I wonder if there’s an issue about distance education research itself. Am I getting more cantankerous or is the quality of the research I see sometimes not very good? There certainly have been recent criticisms of distance education research such as Zawacki-Richter, Bäcker, & Vogt (2009). But what I mean is that time and time again I see a report of some initiative—usually some novel e-learning software—that is then evaluated by a questionnaire that finds that students thought the initiative was helpful. The report then concludes that the initiative or software enhanced the student learning experience. Very seldom is there any acknowledgement that the questionnaire only went to the survivors of the initiative or any hard evidence of increased retention.
OK. I understand that educational research is not easy. Finding a way to emulate the medical research model, with its randomized controlled studies comparing experimental and control groups is particularly difficult. But it’s not wholly impossible, there are some good examples and I think we need to demand more of researchers and reports.

ALAN:

If distance education institutions want to become a true learning organization then they have to become systematic in designing, implementing, and evaluating innovations in the general area of teaching and learning, and particularly with regard to retention. Previous attempts to improve retention have tended to be small local interventions that have been impossible to evaluate and have not been scaled up.

In the UKOU, for example, other large-scale changes to the student support system have been introduced across the board on little or no evidence. However difficult it might be, distance institutions should bite the bullet and go for the medical research model and randomized controlled studies. Only then can we decide which strategies are sustainable and worthwhile.

ORMOND:

I think we can clearly agree on that! And despite the fact that many of our examples are drawn from the UKOU I guess we can also agree that the elephant (distance education dropout) is still in the room of all distance institutions. And it needs to be shot. . . .

CONCLUSION: ALAN AND ORMOND

We hope that we have made ourselves sufficiently clear about the purpose of our chapter. As far as we are concerned, the issue of retention in distance education is not one out of a dozen interesting topics for academics to wrangle enjoyably over but the central issue that affects real live people—our students—and quite possibly negatively in a majority of cases. It should be at the heart of any activity and reportage on distance education. Much of the academic discourse in distance education feels peripheral. It’s as if car
manufacturers spent all their time arguing over the shape of their cars’ interior mirrors whilst ignoring the fact that 80% of their production is unsafe at any speed.

As it is, retention is barely mentioned as an issue in the literature—as exemplified in the otherwise admirable article reviewing distance education research (Zawacki-Richter, Bäcker, & Vogt, 2009), where it only gets a passing mention in a sub-heading.

In any case, retention should not be a topic for dissection of the nine-and-sixty ways in which it might just be possible to effect slight changes in it. As with the global financial crisis, we know what has to be done—the interesting question is why we don’t do it.

Future research needs to focus on institutional attitudes to retention—what the psychosocial and attitudinal barriers are to increasing retention, not so much amongst students but amongst distance education staff. It also needs to learn from the new developments outside distance education in learning psychology—in particular what motivates students to learn and what sustains their motivation.

There also needs to be research into the cost-benefits of retention and to examine Daniel’s iron triangle of accessibility, quality, and cost, where he maintains that changes in any one of those sides usually changes the other sides in undesirable ways (Daniel, West, & Mackintosh, 2006). It may be that the reality is that there is a “plastic triangle” where investment into retention improves students’ graduation rates, thereby increasing students’ and governments’ willingness to pay more, which can then be re-invested back into retention.

We accept that this is a radical message. But as it stands, we believe distance education is essentially dysfunctional—we need to make retention the main thing, and then to keep the main thing the main thing.

REFERENCES


Simpson, O. (2011c). *Distance Education: Are we failing our students?* Paper presented at the University of South Africa Festival of Teaching and Learning.


